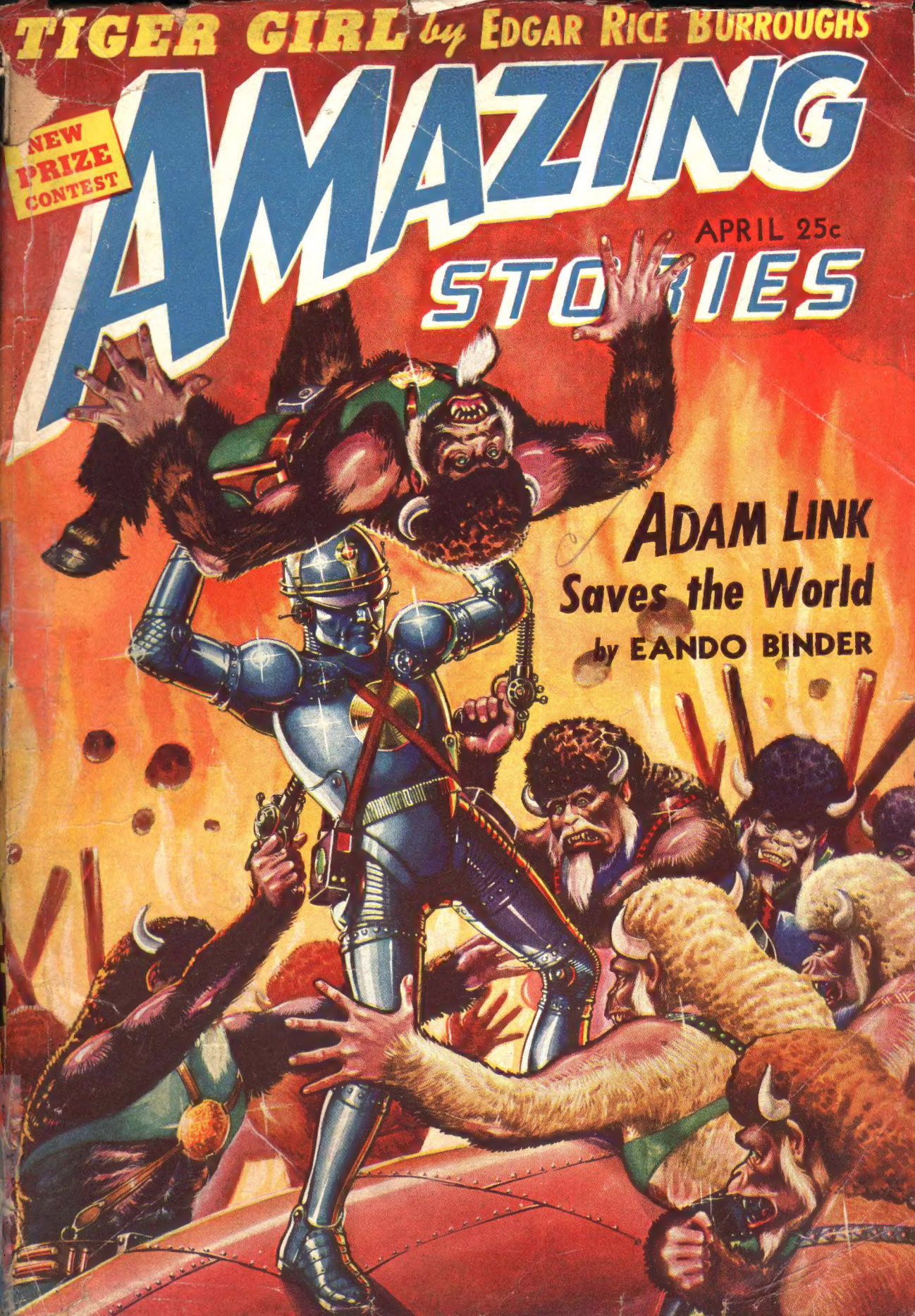
TIGER GIRL by EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS

AMAZING STORIES

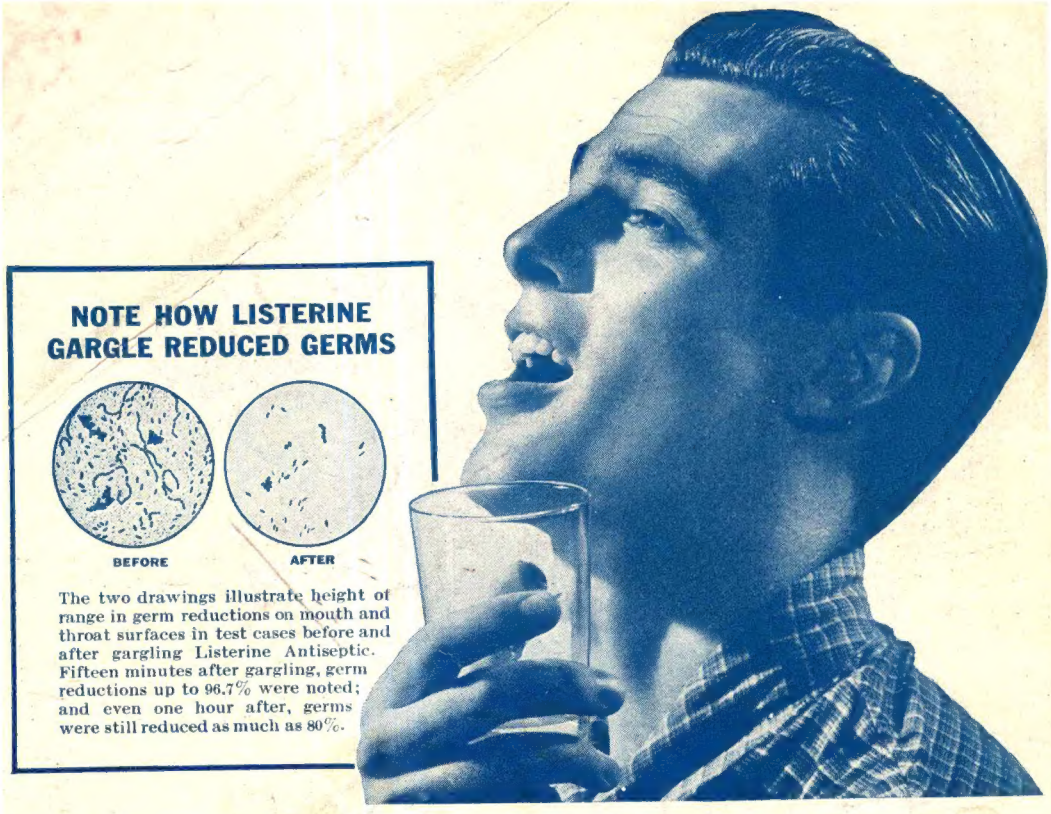
NEW PRIZE CONTEST

APRIL 25c



ADAM LINK Saves the World

by EANDO BINDER


NOTE HOW LISTERINE GARGLE REDUCED GERMS
BEFORE
AFTER
The two drawings illustrate height of range in germ reductions on mouth and throat surfaces in test cases before and after gargling Listerine Antiseptic. Fifteen minutes after gargling, germ reductions up to 96.7% were noted; and even one hour after, germs were still reduced as much as 80%.

A Cold Is An Infection, Treat It As Such With Germ-Killing Action

Tests showed that Listerine Antiseptic reduced surface germs as much as 96.7% even 15 minutes after the gargle; up to 80% one hour later.

Often the prompt and frequent use of Listerine Antiseptic helps old Mother Nature to combat a cold before it becomes serious.

Here's one reason why, we believe.

Listerine Antiseptic reaches way back on throat surfaces to kill millions of the "secondary invaders" which, many noted laryngologists say, are responsible for so many of a cold's miserable symptoms.

We feel that Listerine's quick germ-killing action explains its amazing test record against colds during a period of 10 years.

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Regular twice-a-day users of Listerine actually had fewer colds, shorter colds, and milder colds than those who did not gargle with it.

So, when you feel a cold coming on, gargle with full strength Listerine Antiseptic—quick and often. You may save yourself a long siege of trouble.

LAMBERT PHARMACAL COMPANY, *St. Louis, Mo.*

GARGLE

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IF THE going is tough — if you can't get a raise — feel you're doomed to a low-pay job — or if you now have a defense job and are worried about how long it will last — take a tip from the hundreds of men who have jumped their pay by training at home in spare time to become Radio Technicians. Today these men enjoy good jobs in a growing, expanding business with a future.

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Over 800 broadcasting stations in the U. S. employ thousands of Radio Technicians with average pay among the country's best paid industries. Repairing, servicing, selling home and auto Radio receivers (there are over 50,000,000 in use) gives good jobs to thousands. Many other Radio Technicians take advantage of the opportunities to have their own service or retail Radio businesses. Think of the many good pay jobs in connection with Aviation, Commercial, Police Radio and Public Address Systems. N.R.I. trains you to be ready when Television opens new jobs. Yes, Radio Technicians make good money because they use their heads as well as their hands. They must be trained. Many are getting special ratings in the Army and Navy; extra rank and pay.

Many Make $5, $10 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

Nearly every neighborhood offers opportunities for a good part-time Radio Technician to make extra money fixing Radio sets. I give you special training to show you how to start cashing in on these opportunities early. You get Radio parts and instructions for building test equipment, for conducting experiments that give you valuable practical experience.

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J. E. SMITH, President
Dept. 2CM, National Radio Institute
Washington, D. C.

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APRIL
1942

AMAZING STORIES

TRADE MARK REGISTERED

VOLUME 16
NUMBER 4

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Front cover painting by Robert Fuqua, illustrating a scene from "Adam Link Saves The World"
Back cover painting by Frank R. Paul, depicting the "City Of The Future"
Illustrations by Robert Fuqua, J. Allen St. John, Rod Ruth, Malcolm Smith, Joe Sewell

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AMAZING STORIES APRIL 1942

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Volume 16 Number 4

ADVERTISEMENT

DO THE DEAD RETURN?

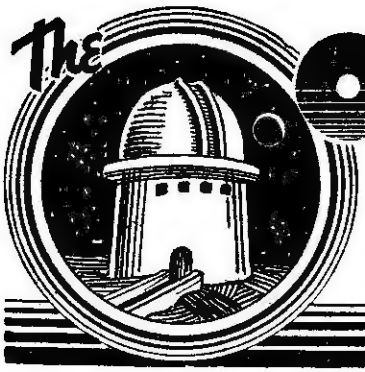
A strange man in Los Angeles, known as "The Voice of Two Worlds," tells of astonishing experiences in far-off and mysterious Tibet, often called the land of miracles by the few travelers permitted to visit it. Here he lived among the lamas, mystic priests of the temple. "In your previous lifetime," a very old lama told him, "you lived here, a lama in this temple. You and I were boys together. I lived on, but you died in youth, and were reborn in England. I have been expecting your return."

The young Englishman was amazed as he looked around the temple where he was believed to have lived and died. It seemed uncannily familiar, he appeared to know every nook and corner of it, yet—at least in this lifetime—he had never been there before. And mysterious was the set of circumstances that had brought him. Could it be a case of reincarnation, that strange belief of the East that souls return to earth again and again, living many lifetimes?

Because of their belief that he had formerly been a lama in the temple, the lamas welcomed the young man with open arms and taught him rare mysteries and long-hidden practices, closely guarded for three thousand years by the sages, which have enabled many to perform amazing feats. He says that the system often leads to almost unbelievable improvement in power of mind, can be used to achieve brilliant business and professional success as well as great happiness. The young man himself later became a noted explorer and geographer, a successful publisher of maps and atlases of the Far East, used throughout the world.

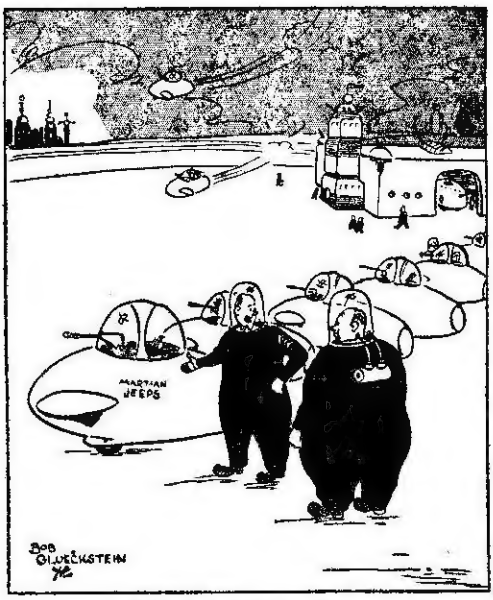
"There is in all men a sleeping giant of mindpower," he says. "When awakened, it can make man capable of surprising feats, from the prolonging of youth to success in many other worthy endeavors." The system is said by many to promote improvement in health; others tell of increased bodily strength, courage and poise.

"The time has come for this long-hidden system to be disclosed to the Western world," declares the author, and offers to send his amazing 9000 word treatise—which reveals many startling results—to sincere readers of this publication, free of cost or obligation. For your free copy, address the Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. 92L, Los Angeles, Calif. Readers are urged to write promptly, as only a limited number of the free treatises have been printed.



The OBSERVATORY by THE Editor

IF you haven't already noticed it, you'd better turn to the back of the book and see how many pages this issue contains! Yessir, 32 pages more than last month. Bigger and better than ever! You want to know the reason? Oh, that's easy. When a story like Edmond Hamilton's "Treasure On Thunder Moon" comes along, and it happens to be 30,000 words long, and it happens that this issue already has Don Wilcox's 30,000-word final instalment of his grand serial in it, plus a full length novel of Adam Link, and a Burroughs novel of Pellucidar, something has to be done! So, with our usual brilliant mental processes, we finally figure out that more pages are needed! Presto, we put 'em in. But we are getting a little dizzy. These special issues are beginning to haunt us in our sleep. However it's a pleasure to hand out presents to readers as fine as you are. All of which means thanks a load for all your grand letters. It makes us feel good to know you like what we give you in this amazing new *Amazing Stories!*



"Slip into this for size"

THE day after Christmas we boarded a train for New York, and took a postman's holiday. We really meant to just have a good time, but we met so many people that it got to be a dizzy whirl of snatching up new treats for our readers. We want to hint quite specially at one tidbit ("bit" is hardly the word!) which is now coming off the typewriter of one David V. Reed. It's a novel, and boy, what a novel! If it doesn't sock you right between the eyes, we are still in our cups (naturally there was a modicum of holiday cheer).

NEW York's a grand town. Here in Chicago, nobody smokes in theatres. In New York they do, darn 'em! We have a subway, but so far only a few brave explorers have ventured into it. In New York, even the brave explorers would be fools to venture into it during the rush hour. Of course, we did, but we regretted it. We forgot to say "which way to thoiteenth" to the bus driver, and he froze us solid with an icy stare. Naturally we didn't deserve an answer. We didn't get any. We knew we were one of those miserable specimens of humanity known as a "joik".

BUT we still say it's a grand town. We'll go back again someday, after we've edited a few more magazines! We realize now we are distinctly "small-town stuff"!

NOW look, readers, this issue has another of those contests we swore we'd never run again, because they gave us so much work. But here we are, giving a new one, because we know you like 'em. This one's simple. All you gotta do is get the hero out of the hole author Miles Shelton put him into. Read the story, which begins on page 84. The rules are on page 94.

ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS does our Scientific Mystery for this month, and his story is first-hand. He was actually down around there and saw all he writes about, and one of these days we're going to go down there personally and see for ourselves. There are really some

(Continued on page 8)

Getting Up Nights Makes Many Feel Old

Do you feel older than you are or suffer from Getting Up Nights, Backache, Nervousness, Leg Pains, Dizziness, Swollen Ankles, Rheumatic Pains, Burning, scanty or frequent passages? If so, remember that your Kidneys are vital to your health and that these symptoms may be due to non-organic and non-systemic Kidney and Bladder troubles—in such cases CYSTEX (a physician's prescription) usually gives prompt and joyous relief by helping the Kidneys flush out poisonous excess acids and wastes. You have everything to gain and nothing to lose in trying Cystex. An iron-clad guarantee wrapped around each package assures a refund of your money on return of empty package unless fully satisfied. Don't take chances on any Kidney medicine that is not guaranteed. Don't delay. Get Cystex (Sisstex) from your druggist today. **Only 35c.** The guarantee protects you.

Cystex Helps Flush Kidneys

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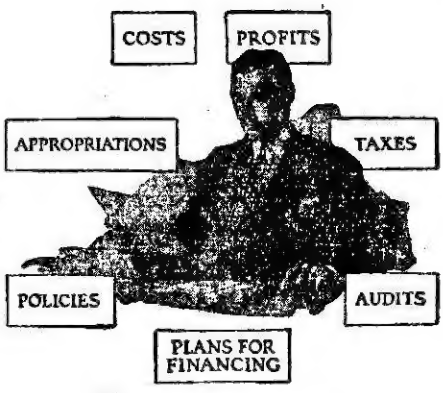

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☐ Credit and Collection Correspondence

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Present Position .....

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(Continued from page 6)

amazing things in this country of ours, and when it comes to ancient civilizations and archeological mysteries, we won't give one single inch to any other continent.

NELSON S. BOND appears in this issue with a new character, a guy named Lucky Logan. We think you'll like him. And later on Lancelot Biggs and Horsesense Hank are coming back. Plus that novel we've been talking about, which is now being illustrated by Robert Fuqua. However, stories aren't the only thing Nelson has created lately. Got a card from him the other day saying: "It's a BOY! Lynn Nelson Bond, 7 lbs., 6 oz., 12:36 a.m., January 1st, first Roanoker of the New Year. Betty and baby fine. Just a flash; I thought you'd like to know. Nelsbond." Sure we want to know, Nelson! Hearty congratulations, and we advise you right now to keep a copy of AMAZING STORIES handy by the little fellow's bedside. He may want to know what his dad's doing at that funny clicking machine in the other room! And besides, we think he'll like the book!

RETURNING once more is that amazingly popular little Earthman in Mars, Don Hargreaves. Festus Pragnell has a delightful little yarn here, and we think you'll appreciate some of the subtle satire the little fellow gets across.

AMAZING STORIES is going to have a new sister, or a brother, whichever you prefer. The new addition to the Ziff-Davis family is a big new detective book, which is being planned as the leader in its field just as AMAZING STORIES leads the science fiction field and *Fantastic Adventures* tops the fantasy ranks. Watch for further announcement in this magazine. We can guarantee it'll be the best detective entertainment on the market.

IF you were to visit our offices, you'd find that your favorite magazine is put together behind a door numbered "12." You'd find that it was next to a door numbered "14." There is no 13 because Herman R. Bollin, whose art-directing is the reason for our top-notch covers and layouts and make-up is superstitious about it, and you can hardly blame him, when it means, too, that he is right next to the office where all these amazing things go on.

Entering that door you'd find your editor sitting behind a desk with nothing on it and behind another desk you'd find a very beautiful girl working furiously on 940 pages of material all at once.

You would look scathingly at your editor and remark: "You cad!" and then you would reconsider, because you would realize that your editor is at least smart enough to know that his very capable secretary is the secret of his success. Why don't you drop in and meet Elaine? She's science fiction's top science fiction editoress!

AS we write this, William P. McGivern sits beside us. He has just come in, and he has seen the advance cover on this issue. He suggests a new contest. A cash prize to the reader who can, unaided, carry away all the Ziff-Davis magazines at one time. Which is an apt suggestion at that. We are quite proud of our giant Naval Aviation issue of *Flying & Popular Aviation*, which has become a collectors' item at this writing.

THIS business of special issues seems to be contagious, but maybe it's because you readers requested it. So with the April issue of *Fantastic Adventures*, our sister magazine, which features the fantasy side of imaginative fiction, we are presenting a special large-size edition of that magazine too. It will contain 244 pages and 9 complete stories including "Dwellers of the Deep" by Don Wilcox, "Hok Visits the Land of Legends" by Manly Wade Wellman (who is now serving Uncle Sam), "Time Wounds All Heels" by Robert Bloch, and many others. It's an issue you certainly shouldn't miss. You might call it our 3½ year birthday. Anyway, don't miss two-bits' worth of really fine fantasy; it's the biggest two-bits' worth you've ever seen, that is, next to *Amazing*.

SOME of our science fiction stories have told of garrison stands by outposts of Earthman on some far-flung world. They've been tales of glorious action and courage, of a pulp fiction variety. But the recent stand of the United States Marines on Wake Island has given us a true saga that makes the work of our inspired authors sink into the background for sheer glory. Whenever we read a fiction story that has a fight like that one in it, we'll think of Wake Island—and of what we're going to do to the Japs when we get around to taking Wake away from them again. We understand that the Marines have reserved that little trick for themselves alone. Go it, you Bulldogs! Give 'em hell!

SPEAKING of Japs, not so long before the Pearl Harbor treachery, we received a protest from Japanese sources against the use of the term Jap in referring to the coward-race. Therefore, knowing that it is insulting to them we shall hereafter refrain from using any other term.

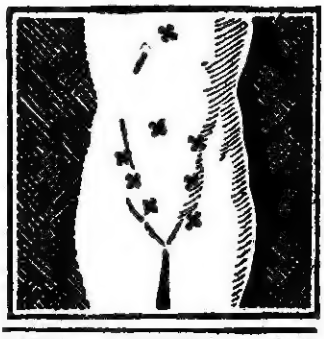
MR. W. B. ROLLINS, of Covington, Kentucky, writes: "Your proofreading is terrible. At

(Concluded on page 112)

IS YOUR Rupture GETTING Worse?

It is a terrible thing to feel that your rupture is getting worse, growing larger and larger, without your *seeming* to be able to do anything about it! Haunting fear destroys mental poise and makes many *despondent*. Inability to be active takes the *physical joys* out of life.

Yes, it is terrible . . . but far more a tragedy when it is all *so absolutely needless!* Now please—and again please—do not think that this is an attempt to capitalize on your misfortune in an effort to just sell you something. We simply have information for you that has brought deliverance and joy to about 3,000,000 persons: men, women and children . . . *facts* that have satisfied thousands of doctors . . . facts we want *you* to consider, to your everlasting good!



X Where's YOUR Rupture?

STOP IT, STOP IT!

AS sure as you live and breathe, if you have a reducible rupture, you can *stop your rupture worries* and once again find the world, your work, your pleasures so full of joy and happiness that you will be an utterly new person . . . alive, vivid, energetic and happy past all the old nightmare fears that have been making your existence a bad dream.

There is no claptrap magic about the famous Brooks Air-Cushion Rupture Appliance. It isn't something experimental. It has been used and improved for years. Over 9000 doctors (who know about rupture) wear the BROOKS, or recommend it to many, many thousands of patients. What is the Patented Automatic Air-Cushion? Just this.

WRONG Hard pad gouging in keeps Rupture open and prevents natural healing.

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It is the part of the BROOKS Appliance that holds back your rupture—the most important part of any truss. It is a yielding, air-filled rubber chamber designed to a shape that clings, that holds with complete security *without gouging in.* Understand that—*without gouging in!* Ill-fitting, incorrectly designed trusses, as you know all too well, *do* gouge in.

Now here is what happens. The Brooks Air-Cushion *avoids* spreading the rupture opening and making it larger, the way some trusses do. Well, when the BROOKS permits the edges of the rupture opening to remain as close together as possible, Nature has the best chance to step in and close the opening. Mind you we don't guarantee this. But if you have reducible rupture, the BROOKS is designed to work with nature. And thousands of BROOKS users have reported the abandonment of any truss.

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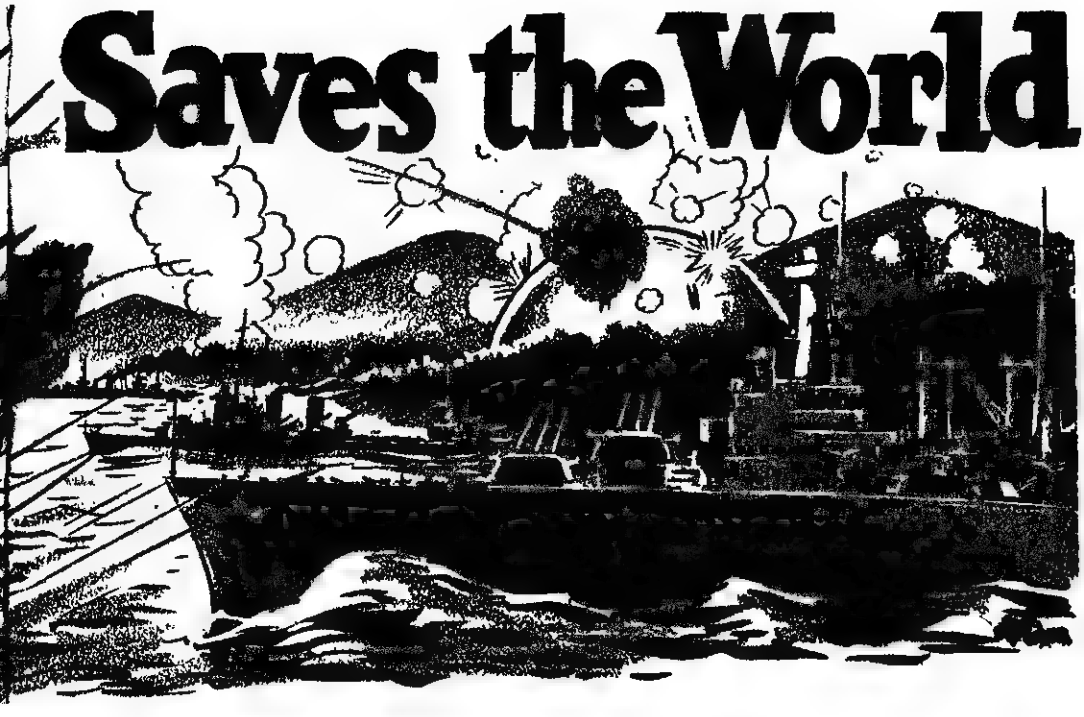
City ..... State .....

State whether for Man ☐, Woman ☐, or Child ☐.

I lifted the two Navy men out of the full force of the blast

I, Saves the World



by Eando Binder

America is invaded by a great power. Can it be Nazi Germany? And if so, can Adam Link solve the menace of its incredible science?

I, Adam Link the robot, saved the earth!

You will find no slightest clue to this event, in any public source of information. Nor have I any proof. There are things buried in the most secret and guarded archives of nations and regimes that never see the light of history. This is one of them.

But yet, I saved the Earth and mankind. Saved them from a menace more deadly than any on record.

Fantastic statement! The mouthings of a brain twisted by delusions of grandeur, you say. A psychopathic case history. Opium works on robots as well as humans!

Let me tell the story. Judge for yourselves.

It began one warm July evening, three months ago. Eve and I were alone in our isolated Ozark "home," talking over the crushing failure of our Utopia experiment. I felt dreary, soul-sick.

"Eve," I was saying, "we're done. We're finished. Everything we've tried in the world of humans has failed. I give up."

"Adam! Don't say that. We'll prove our worth yet—"

"No," I grated. "We have no worth —except as a few dollars worth of mechanical parts. We're intelligent robots, but we're of no Earthly use whatsoever!" I repeated the bitter self-denouncement. "We're of no Earthly use whatso—"

Interruption came, in the form of a knock at the door..

We started, looking at each other. Who was visiting us? Who had taken the winding, little-known road leading to our door? A pack of humans, perhaps, to once and for all rid Earth of robots?

"Don't resist," I told Eve. "I suppose it had to come to this—our extinction."

I flung open the door. There was no pack. There was just one human —a man with hat pulled low, one hand resting in a pocket as though gripping a pistol. He gave me a glance, darted his eyes around the cabin, then stepped in. Back in the shadow was his car, in which he had arrived. He had an air of profound secrecy.

"Adam Link?" he asked quite unnecessarily. I cannot easily be mistaken for Clark Gable or any human.

"Yes. Who are you?"

For answer, he drew back the flap of his coat, displaying a small medallion whose inscription he explained.

"Secret Service of the United States. I am Joe Trent, Operative Number 65. We want you, Adam Link!"

"Official lynching?" I hissed, and suddenly my brain smoked with rage. "Go! You humans won't finish me off this easily. Go and come back with all your army. You'll have to blast me out of the hills, if you want me!"

I would go down in Earth history as a one-man rebellion, holding off a mighty army for days and weeks. They couldn't deny me that last flash of glory.

"You refuse?" the Secret Service man said.

I nodded grimly, waiting for him to threaten me with all the forces of the army, navy, and air corps.

Instead, his shoulders seemed to sag a little. His voice changed to pleading.

"You don't understand!" he cried. "We're in trouble. Washington's in trouble!"

I stared.

"In trouble? You mean you've come to ask my—help?"

He nodded eagerly.

"Ive been sent here by the—"

Breaking off, he went to the door, peered out cautiously as though fearing eavesdroppers, then closed it carefully. He turned back. What was the need for all this elaborate secrecy?

"By the President himself!" he finished. "We need you, Adam Link. You're our last hope. We're stumped, and we've come to you as the last possibility to avert what may be catastrophe for our nation!"

"Explain!" I demanded, half dazed.

"First of all, I must swear you to utter secrecy. None of this must leak out to public channels. Have I your word?"

I nodded. At his hesitation, I added, "I never lie. That is a human trait."

He took that without argument, and went on in a rush.

"The story is this. A month ago, a certain destroyer of the United States fleet passed San Domingo on routine patrol. San Domingo island is our possession, as you probably know. The captain saw a strange thing on the headland—a new fort!

"The fort had not been there a month before. It had not been commissioned by our government. Whose fort was it?"

"Obviously that of a foreign power," I put in. "They sneaked it in right under your noses!"

The operative shook his head.

"Impossible. Our fleet has been on emergency patrol since the trouble in Europe started. It would take a whole convoy of supply ships to put up such a fort. No convoy could brazenly sneak through our tight neutrality pa-

trol."

"Then they dropped the material and men from the skies, by aircraft," I said impatiently.

"That's what we're afraid of," Joe Trent nodded. "Natives at the other side of the island reported seeing a great lighted ship come down one night. It meant that a foreign power had established a foothold in our hemisphere!"

"So what?" I snapped. It seemed so childish, these human doings. "Since you discovered the fort before they operated from it, it's simply a matter of destroying it."

"We tried," Trent responded. "The destroyer shelled the fort, when it refused to answer by radio. We had the right. It's our soil. The fort seemed unharmed. Other ships came, to try, including heavy cruisers. Eventually three battleships steamed there, and shelled it with the biggest guns known to naval science."

He paused and went on in a whisper-

"Not one shell took effect. Not one chip was knocked off that fort!"

MY IMPATIENCE vanished. This was really something.

"You suspect what?" I asked.

"The New Weapon!" he groaned. "Or call it the New Defense. A certain foreign enemy—I need not name him—has established himself in an impregnable base from which to operate against us. Any day—blitzkrieg on America!"

His face went haggard, now.

"You're the last hope, Adam Link. We thought of you, when all else failed. You have a super-brain, some say. We don't know. Can you help us?"

How can I describe the overwhelming thrill that shot through my iridium-sponge brain? Humans sought my help! They had hounded me, balked me, sneered at me. Now they begged at my knees. Moments like this were rare.

Should I refuse? Should I send him away, as they had so often turned me aside? What did it matter to me whether one group or another of humans ruled here? But suddenly, a horrible picture flashed in my mind. Regimented robots under the command of a hard, ruthless master! He would not ignore me. He would *use* me—in frightful ways.

"I'll try to help," I said. "Where do I go?"

"Thank Heaven!" Joe Trent said. "Everything has been arranged. I'll take you in my car to the nearest airport. There a fast plane is waiting to take us to Key West, one of our naval bases. At Key West, a warship will take us to San Domingo."

"Come, Eve," I said. "We will look over this mysterious fort that cannot be destroyed."

FORTY-EIGHT hours later, the battleship X steamed in the night to the headland of San Domingo island. In the grey dawn, a fort slowly took visible form on the coast. I was on the bridge with the captain, the fleet commander, and Joe Trent. All the warship's crew were at guns and battle stations, ready for any attack from the fort.

"There it is!" Trent said in nervous tones. "It's within striking distance of the whole eastern seaboard. It must be destroyed."

I looked the mysterious fort over. Even from our distance of five miles, the closest they dared go, the fort loomed like a mighty man-made mountain. Through binoculars, it was a dome shaped structure with a solid rampart of metal facing the sea. From recessed apertures bristled ugly cannon

snouts.

"They haven't fired back one shot, yet," Trent informed. "They don't have to, since our shells are useless. Adam, what's the answer?"

But I was thinking, silently.

The fleet commander, at my side seemed nettled at my presence. It was a slap in his face. He signaled his fleet to stand by, while the battleship shelled the fort, once again.

The great 18-inch cannon bellowed, shattering the dawn silence. I watched shell after shell explode against that wide rampart, with no more effect than peas shot by a child.

"Look out!" I yelled suddenly. "One of the enemy guns is moving and aiming for us!"

"Nonsense!" barked the rear admiral, not knowing of my sharp mechanical vision and mathematical brain. "Continue firing."

That gun at the fort spoke. Livid flame belched from it. Five seconds later, one of our destroyer escort folded in the middle and sank.

"They're firing back for the first time!" Trent screamed. "God—look!"

In rapid succession, three more destroyers sank. Each was nearer to our battleship, as though the enemy gunners were toying with us. Then a shot came that seemed to stove in the entire side of our flagship.

Concussion threw me against the bridge rail with such force that my body-plates creaked. I thrust out both hands, catching the admiral with one, Trent with the other, before they catapulted into the sea.

The well-trained crew did not panic. Life-boats lowered systematically into the water. Before the huge battlewagon heeled over and sank, its entire living compliment were safe. I was in a life-boat with the admiral and Trent. They had thrust a life-belt around me, uselessly. No life-belt could stop me from sinking like a stone, if once I fell into the sea.

I knew fear in that moment. If the enemy followed up the sinkings with shrapnel, they could wipe us out totally. But they didn't. No more shots came, and the last destroyer, behind a smoke screen, picked up all survivors and steamed us to Key West.

The world does not know of this—any of this.

AT DAWN the next day, a formidable fleet sailed to San Domingo. Six battleships, eighteen cruisers and sixty destroyers. They rained a hell of destruction on the fort that had at last bared its fangs. Half the day they shelled, before answer came, as though the enemy disdained slaughter. Then, despite smoke screens, maneuvers, and all the tricks known to naval warfare, seven craft were picked off at twelve miles from the fort, by its deadly guns.

I saw all this from an observation plane, with Trent.

"Senseless sacrifice," I said. "Stationary fort guns are always superior to naval guns."

The fleet withdrew, realizing that too. And when the smoke cleared, there was the fort, with not a distinguishable mark on it.

The American forces had not given up. A horde of aircraft passed us, and began dropping bombs. Dive bombing, invented by America, was used. The enemy anti-aircraft retaliated. They picked off bombers with steady, incredible precision. The American forces withdrew.

And again, when the smoke cleared, the fort-dome lay undamaged, sparkling in the sun. No conceivable base could have withstood that hammering from the air. This one did.

Three days later, the final assault was tried. A co-ordinated attack by land, sea and air. This had been in preparation for a month, since the fort was discovered. The other attacks had been preliminary.

First the naval forces hurled over tons of shells, from their extreme range behind dense smoke screens. One little crack in the dome might mean victory. At the same time, the air force bombed relentlessly, from high up, with bomb-sights envied by the world.

Then, at a prearranged time, the barrage ceased, and the waiting land forces attacked directly. They came at the back of the fort, from the island's interior. Tanks formed the spearhead, rumbling forward with spitting guns. Behind followed shock troops. If the stupendous shelling and bombing had opened one little crack, one means of entry, they would invade the fort and finish the battle within.

From our observation plane, we saw a strange sight. A barrage from the enemy shattered the first line of tanks. They simply blew to bits. The second wave roared up—to the same fate. The third and last line of tanks gallantly charged—and stalled! Stalled dead, as though their crews had fallen asleep.

It was the same with the shock troops. It took magnificent courage to charge, against what they had seen. But I suppose they were filled with a blinding rage at this maddening enemy.

Three waves of men tried to crack the nut. Two waves went down like mown grass. The third wave fell, but limply, as though gassed or paralyzed. And then the rest of the soldiers, their morale finally broken, fled in complete rout.

I saw one more thing, before falling dusk obscured vision. Figures scurried from the fort, carrying the limp men in, as prisoners. And the undamaged tanks were driven inside, with their unconscious crews.

THE battle was over. America had been defeated by land and sea and air! You will find no record of this, I repeat. There could be no official declaration of war, since the enemy had not yet been identified. I think the sunken ships have been ascribed to sabotage, for public consumption.

"The best is absolutely impregnable!" Trent moaned. "Perhaps this was the final test, for their New Defense. And their New Weapon, some kind of gas. Now the enemy can hack away at America's defense lines at its leisure!"

He looked at me.

"This is where you come in, Adam Link. We're stumped, with our human methods. Are there any methods you, as a robot, can try?"

I shook my head, and Joe Trent wept. Yes, he wept. For he knew that his country was doomed.

"Adam!' Eve said sadly. "Isn't there anything we can do, as robots?"

There was still faint hope in Trent's hollow eyes.

But I shook my head again.

"Trent," I said. "Advise the government to send one tank up to the fort. Have it fly a white flag. It will be a commission to ask the enemy its terms!"

"God!" Trent said hopelessly. "I guess you're right. But suppose they ruthlessly destroy the tank—and go on, wishing complete invasion?"

"I want to go with the tank," I said. "Eve and I, disguised as humans. If they destroy the tank—" I shrugged. "If they let us in, to talk, fine. You see, I want to get *inside* that fort!"

Joe Trent stared.

"There's one human method left," I finished. "Sabotage—but by robots!"

CHAPTER II

The Enemy Is Revealed

IT WAS daybreak.

One tank, a huge 25-ton monster, rumbled slowly toward the back of the fort. From the conning tower waved a large white flag. There were six humans in the tank—to the casual eye. Two were the crew, one at the controls, one at the guns. Two men were high officials whom I cannot name, empowered to receive and deliver the enemy's terms to the United States government.

The remaining two were Eve and myself. Again, as once before, we were disguised as humans. Flesh-colored plastics hid our metal bodies. Skillfully molded pseudo-features gave us the appearence of two rather stocky, poker-faced thugs. Eve was a "man" too. The disguise was a deception that might not hold up more than an hour or so. But I wanted to get within the fort. Once within, I would see what could be done.

But there was the chance that the enemy would simply annihilate us.

"If that happens, Eve," I murmured to her. "Farewell! Our short sojourn among humans will be over in a flash of glory, though unsung."

"Goodbye, dearest!" she returned, against that eventuality.

The humans with us in the tank were grim, pale. Would the enemy receive us? Or would they blast us to atoms, so that there would be no excuse for not going ruthlessly on, invading the continent?

Our answer came with one swift sweep of the scythe of Death. The universe split open in a rending crash. The tank crumpled like a cracked walnut. A shell from some large-calibre gun had struck directly. A second shot exploded within, flinging the riddled bodies of six dead humans out like broken debris.

No, four dead humans.

Two of the original six flew fifty feet through the air, landing among bushes with a metallic clang. Eve and I should have been killed, too, except that after the first shell, we had leaped with snap-reflexes. We were already sailing out of the split tank when the second shell hit. Its concussion merely blew us into the bushes.

To the enemy, it must have seemed we were destroyed, too. Well they knew no human beings could survive those two direct hits. They were right. No humans could. But Eve and I, with hard metal beneath our false human disguise, were no more than shaken up by the concussion and landing on the ground.

Still, we lay stunned, hardly aware for a minute that we were alive. Dents were in the metal beneath our human clothing, from flying pieces of the shattered tank. But we lived.

I moved my mirror-eyes and saw Eve lying ten feet away, flat on her back. Her hand twitched as she was about to spring up, happy to be saved.

"Hsst!" I whispered. "Don't move, you little fool. Let them think we're dead humans!"

THUS we lay still. We were in full view of the fort. If we had moved the slightest, they would see it. But it was simple for us to automatically shut down our internal locomotor center. We were then "dead" from the neck down. We lay as completely inert as any corpse.

We lay that way all day, motionless.

The enemy did not come out. They let the bodies lay, to rot, as all the troops they had slaughtered lay rotting further back. The utter heartless-

ness and brutality of the enemy enraged me. Those Europeans must be monsters. I felt like springing up again, denouncing them in stentorian tones.

But that would be sheer folly. We must wait for night, get in the fort, and fulfill our mission. Fate had lent us a finger, so far.

Night fell, at long last. When the deepest darkness had arrived, I signalled Eve and we cautiously arose, hiding behind bushes.

No light hung outside the fort. And no light shone from any aperture or window. They had built the fort as solidly as a half-shell of steel set down squarely on the ground. Certainly it was the queerest structure we had ever seen or heard of.

I estimated its dimensions from its bulking curve against the star-filled sky. No less than a half-mile in diameter, and 2000 feet high! Colossal engineering had been required to erect it. They must have worked on it months and months. Yet Joe Trent swore it hadn't been there a month before.

I shrugged.

"Let's get in, Eve," I whispered. "I want to meet these amazing humans who have done miracles in engineering and warfare both."

Get in, but how? Sheer blankness of wall mocked us. I strode close to the structure, in shadow, and rapped on it slightly. Metal? But it gave no ring, only a dull thud. Not wood, certainly. Some kind of plastic, harder than steel? It must be harder than tungsten-steel, to withstand all the bombarding I had seen.

"With bases like these to work from, Eve," I said, "they can easily conquer all Earth. This must be a long-range plan by the European dictators to rule the world. We must get in and spike this place some way. Any way!"

But we stood baffled before the adamant structure.

Fate again leaned our way.

WE THREW ourselves flat as a sudden glow fell around us. Had we been spied? But then I saw the light was only a reflection bouncing down from some greater light at the dome's peak. This light shafted like a searchlight beam straight into the sky, with an intensity that drilled through scattered clouds. It must be visible for hundreds of miles.

"I see," I told Eve. "It's a signal beacon, for their supply and reinforcement ships from across the ocean. One or more must be due to land."

A moment later, a giant airship dropped from the sky, of an advanced design I had never seen before. A stratosphere ship, undoubtedly, with its wide wings. The enemy had certainly planned for complete control of Earth.

It dropped almost silently, as if the motors, too, were of a new design that were superbly muffled for swift, silent work. It landed, with the shortest landing run I had ever heard of, not a hundred feet from where we crouched.

At the same time, amazingly, one whole section of the dome soundlessly raised, like the flap of a tent. The ship trundled in, with scarcely a whirr of its motors.

Two robots trundled in after it, with scarcely a whirr of *their* motors. It was the chance we had been waiting for. We were inside!

We scurried to a corner of the dim hangar, flattening against the wall like two motionless shadows.

I congratulated myself, but too soon.

Radiance burst through the room, as some central light clicked on. The glare revealed us plainly. Half-blinded, we noticed figures stepping from the plane. They were facing us.

They could not fail to see us, against the bare wall.

Worst of all, the pitiless lare would reveal the imperfections of our human disguise. And the blasting of the tank had knocked off bits of our plastic, further exposing us. The enemy would know us instantly for robots, and probably destroy us as dangerous. Our mission was nipped in the bud!

Hopelessly, I looked around the hangar. The huge sliding door had shut fast, sealing us in. No other door was open. We were caught. Yes, we could run around, kill those here if necessary, but the rest would know then with whom they dealt. They would besiege us in this room. A fair-sized gun would blow us to bits with a direct hit.

Trapped! Our only hope had been to get in, and seek hiding before we were seen. Now, with this light on, and no egress from the chamber, we were caught.

My eyes suddenly ceased looking for escape.

They turned back to the figures, whom I had given but a glance. A picture was transmitted from my eye-mirrors to my brain that jolted me much more than the tank explosion had.

In fact, I refused to believe what I saw. I told myself that something had gone haywire with my mechanical optic center. Perhaps a wire loose, or a short-circuit throwing everything out of balance. For what I saw just didn't make sense. It was a hopeless distortion.

Yes, it must be that. But then, why was Eve staring rigidly, as though she had seen a ghost of human superstition?

I clicked shut my eyes, looked again.

This time I knew it was no mistake.

Besides, Eve's startled gasp came to me.

"Adam!" she said. "They aren't—aren't—"

"No, they aren't," I agreed dazedly. "They certainly aren't!"

And they weren't.

At this point, my chronicle goes into the sheerly unbelievable. I repeat you will find no record on Earth to back me up. You will cease to believe from here on, and take the rest as fantasy conjured up in the mind of Adam Link. You will, I know. I wish I could.

In short, they *weren't human!*

HOW shall I describe them, in terms you can visualize? It it hard to describe any creature unknown before. Describe a tiger verbally to a child. Then take him to the zoo to see a tiger. I'll warrant the child will see no connection with your description.

Well, imagine first a gorilla. Then an upright buffalo with its horns. Then a surrealistic statute representing a hunchback on whom a mountain has fallen. Blend the three together—long powerful arms, horns at the top, hooves at the bottom, a bulging torso with the head set forward, and the whole thing nine feet tall. Ugly, brutal, repulsive, horned Goliaths.

Oh yes, it was *manlike*. That is, it didn't have extra arms, or two heads, or tentacles, or any other distortion of that kind. It had two legs, two arms, a body, one head with two eyes, two ears, and one mouth. I think evolution, being a blind force that obeys set laws, must clothe its intelligent beings anywhere in the universe with those general features, since they are the most effective.

But all the primates, and most mammals, are built in the same plan as man. Yet there is endless variety. These beings were as different from man, in a horrible fashion, as a gorilla. They walked upright, spoke and ate with their

mouths, and used their hands for manipulation. From there on, their similarity *to man ceased.* They were alien—utterly, nightmarishly alien.

Even I, a robot who was no more than a grotesque parody of man in metal, felt closer to human than these monsters.

And suddenly, the whole aspect of this event changed to something appallingly ominous.

"They aren't human!" Eve was still whispering. "Adam, what does it mean? Where are they from?"

"I don't know," I returned dazedly, still stunned by the shock of it. "I don't know, Eve. They're not of Earth, that's certain."

Eve abruptly gave a sigh.

"Well! It isn't a European invader after all. Won't they be surprised and relieved to hear that, outside?"

I think I felt like striking Eve, for the thoughtless words.

"Relieved?" I grunted. "Good Lord, Eve! Don't you get the significance of this? This isn't a mere European power invading the Western Hemisphere. No, nothing as simple as that. This is a race from another planet, come to take Earth from *all* humans!"

Eve digested that, trembling.

"What shall we do, Adam?" she breathed.

I stiffened.

Three of the aliens had stepped from the ship, turning toward us. They saw us, now. Their hands leaped to holsters, drawing out a mechanism not unlike a gun. They strode forward, covering us.

"Don't move, Eve!" I warned. "We don't know how powerful those guns are."

They approached with a ponderous step, on their hooved feet. Heavy and solid they must be, far heavier than a human, and far stronger. Yet they walked with a certain mincing step that indicated Earth's gravity was trifling to them. Their home-world must have a tremendous gravity, like Jupiter.

Were they from Jupiter?

I wanted to ask, but naturally they had an alien tongue.

The foremost horned giant eyed us with green-irised eyes. He towered three feet above us.

"Two more of the Earthlings, eh?" he said in perfect English. "How did you get in? Don't be so startled. We tuned in your radio, upon arrival, analyzed your language and learned it. We have need to talk with you—what do you call yourselves?—oh yes, humans."

HUMANS! He took us for humans. To his inexperienced eyes, our half-messed human guise was as good as gold. He saw no difference between us and the previous captives. Humans were new to his eyes.

Instantly, I played that advantage up, giving Eve a quick glance.

I spoke, but I didn't say—"yes, we're humans." That was taken for granted. In fact, it would have aroused their suspicions. I simply recounted how we had sneaked in after the plane.

"For what purpose?" the alien demanded, then answered himself. "To spy on us, of course. You hope to escape, with your information. No prisoner can escape. We will keep you alive. We will have use for you, either for vivisection or mental study."

He turned. "Mog, take them to the prison."

I pondered in lightning thought.

I could charge them, at this moment, and take their guns away before they could shoot. I need not fear their obvious strength, as a true human must. But to resist now, would expose us immediately. I would have little chance

to find out more of them, the fort, and their plans. Better to remain prisoner for a while, and take my chances with them later.

I let my shoulders slump, for Eve's benefit. She caught on quickly, making no move to resist. The being named Mog prodded us with his gun, toward the other end of the hangar.

Again it was almost humorous. Any human, poking us with his gun, and meeting unnatural hardness, would know us for a robot. But Mog, having poked few humans, did not know they should all be uniformly soft.

But humor left me as we strode along. No laughing matter, at all.

These non-terrestrial beings represented a stupendous threat to Earth. Their mighty fort, their superpowerful guns, their easy efficiency in learning English, added up to super-science.

Eve must be thinking the same as I. If only this *was* the European enemy, invading America! Better that than this—invasion from space!

And outside this dome lay the world—unknowing. Unaware that soon they would be battling for existence with a foe ten times more powerful and unsympathetic than any European aggressor.

CHAPTER III

Escape from Prison

OPPOSITE the dome-door, in the hangar, was another door that now opened. Several other aliens appeared from the interior. At their head was one who by his manner and dress must be a high official, perhaps chief of the whole dome.

I haven't mentioned clothing. The aliens wore extremely light clothing, merely shorts and a belt with all else bare, as though to them Earth climate was tropical. Moreover, it occurred to me that the dome was air-conditioned to coolness. I could not feel it directly, like a human. But my compensating thermocouple, that allows for extreme temperatures which might tighten bearings, had swung to its low side. The temperature in the dome must be about freezing.

The chief wore a broad chest band with insignia on it, and the others saluted him by touching one hand to their horns.

Our guard, Mog, began to address the chief in their native tongue, but the chief interrupted.

"Use the English tongue, Mog, for practice. It is the Earthlings' most important language. We will have much need for it later. Now, who are these two?"

"Two humans who sneaked in after our plane, to spy, Chief Thorg. I'm taking them to the prison."

Chief Thorg gave us his attention. For a moment, at his sharp stare, I thought he had penetrated our disguise. Then he laughed—or what I took for a laugh. It was a sort of whistling wheeze.

"These little humans," he said, "come in all assorted shapes and sizes, and disfigurements. Look, this one has no nose."

He pointed at me, and I realized with horror that somewhere my plastic "nose" had been knocked off. Was he playing with me, knowing our deception?

"Where did you lose your nose?" he queried.

"In a war," I improvised hastily. "It was shot off."

And the Chief swallowed that! He was already shrugging. He addressed Mog again.

"Your report?"

"We sailed through the stratosphere

of this planet, over what I believe are called Europe and Asia continents. A short flight on this pygmy planet. Dropping low at times, we saw their cities and centers. Very backward there, as everywhere else on this world. There was some kind of war going on, I believe. It was hard to tell, as they fight with such puny weapons."

"Yes, they have puny weapons indeed," the Chief agreed. "Their clumsy attack, the other day, with iron tubs in the water, slow little aircraft, and paper-thin metal carts on land. They are apparently in the Metal Age." By his tone he said "Stone Age." "It seems they know nothing of plastic science and atomic hardening. Well, we will soon conquer them. Take the prisoners away, Mog."

Mog prodded us through the door and down a long corridor. We passed various other aliens. The dome must be crammed with them. Had they all come in one space ship, or several? Were more space ships arriving regularly, augmenting their forces for the grand day of victory?

Those were things I had to find out. I felt a little crushed already. One lone pair of robots against a dome full of these invaders from the void. What hopeless odds faced me?

I tried to pump Mog.

"How many of you are there here on Earth?" I asked.

"Quiet!" he growled. "Speak only when you're spoken to, prisoner."

A SIDE corridor branched to the large prison room. The wide face of it was simply a series of open bars. Behind the bars were the human prisoners. A hundred or so of the soldiers who had been gassed in the battle I had seen, and taken within.

The jailer unlocked the door, and Mog shoved us in.

"Join your fellows," he laughed. "And talk over the end of your race's rule on this planet!"

Eve and I stumbled forward in the rather dimly lit prison. The men hardly glanced up, haggard and despondent. They sat or sprawled on the cold stone, shivering and suffering. We had stumbled over a corpse laid by the door. The jailer dragged it out without a word, locking the door again.

"Pneumonia, I guess," chattered one man to us. "Died an hour ago. The tenth one already, that way. Welcome to hell, strangers!"

I inadvertently stepped on his toe, in the close-packed chamber.

"Ouch! Damn you—" He was suddenly a wild, enraged animal, his nerves broken by the cruel imprisonment. He cracked his fist against my face—or tried to. Eve caught him by the shoulders and held him as easily as a child.

His rage gusted out in stunned incredulity at Eve's strength. And he was suddenly peering at us closely. All the men were. Humans could not be fooled.

"Why, you're not—not humans!" he gasped.

Others had jumped up.

"It's the damned aliens, in disguise! Tear them apart—"

"Stop, you fools," hissed another voice. "Can't you see the metal in spots? It's Adam Link the ro—"

"Shut up!" I snapped quickly, shaking my head violently for their benefit. "I'm Adam Link, the spy."

They caught on, especially when the jailer appeared at the bars. "What's the commotion in there?"

Silence greeted him and he left with a shrug. He hadn't heard the near giveaway. It was my sole ace-in-the-hole, to be taken as a human by the enemy.

I made my way to the far corner of the prison, out of earshot of the jailer

if we talked low. The men quietly moved around me.

"Adam Link the robot!" breathed the man whose toe I had crushed. "I'm Captain Taylor, chief officer of these men. Are you with us, Adam Link? Maybe with your help we can break out and do something!"

I was a little gratified that they had heard of me and my exploits. Most humans had ignored me, or passed me off as a freak or clever toy. These men accepted me as an equal, and sought my help. I cut off these personal ruminations.

"When the time comes," I whispered. "Right now, I have some questions. You were gassed, before capture?"

"Couldn't have been gas," the captain returned, puzzled. "I had my men wear gas-masks. We saw, heard, or felt nothing. All our muscles just suddenly went limp, as if paralyzed. We didn't lose consciousness. The effects wore off in a few hours, after we were locked up here."

Induced paralysis! Perhaps by a projected, invisible ray! My heart sank. Another manifestation of their advanced science. Whole armies and cities rendered helpless, captured without a gunshot, if they wished!

CAPTAIN TAYLOR was suddenly moaning a little. He was, after all, a young man. Recent events had been soulshaking.

"God, the shock of it— seeing these inhuman beings. Horrible creatures from another world! And we thought it was only Hitler! Why, Hitler would be our ally, against them, if he knew. It's a wonder we aren't all insane. Poor Jones did go. I put him out of his misery myself. Adam Link, we've seen enough to know the whole world is threatened. We've got to do something if we can!"

"Easy," I said at the hysterical edge in his voice. "We can't go ahead blindly. What else do you know?"

"Mighty little," Taylor muttered. "We've been locked up in this ice-box all the time. They feed us from the kit-rations they picked up among our dead, after the battle. Every day a few have been taken out. They don't return."

I knew what happened to them, but didn't tell Taylor. Vivisection and mental study. Humans put under the knife and microscope, like interesting little bugs, so that the aliens would know every factor of the race whose world they wanted to wrest away.

Taylor knew nothing of the dome, or the number of aliens, or their guns— things I had to know. I pondered.

"You have a plan?" Captain Taylor asked hopefully. "Somehow I feel glad you're here, Adam Link. You've got to save the human race!"

All their eyes turned to me. I was already accepted as their leader, their champion. Champion of the world, of the human race! Within me, a wild elation surged. It was good to have humans accept me at last, place their trust in me.

But still, what could I do?

"For the present," I began, "we will lay low and—"

INTERRUPTION came, as the door grated open and three aliens stepped in. One of them was Mog again.

"We want three of you—any three," they announced.

They grasped the nearest three men by the arms, roughly, and began dragging them away. One shrieked, struggling to escape. He jabbed his fist in Mog's face.

The giant jabbed back. His gorilla-like arm delivered a blow that knocked the human cold. Then the alien bent

the limp form across his broad chest and slowly began cracking its spine.

"I am strong," Mog boasted. Watch, as I break this wretch in half. It will teach you others a lesson."

The other men watched in helpless horror. Some turned to me, in appeal, but they knew I did not want to reveal my identity. It was more important to save Earth, than save this man. I told myself that, for about one second. Then I acted.

"Adam, don't—" Eve hissed.

"Let go, Eve! There are some things—"

I was there in two strides. I caught the alien by the arm, wrenching him around so that he dropped his burden. Mog glared down at me, from his height of nine feet. I was David before Goliath, a little pygmy scarcely reaching to his chest.

"You must want a taste of my strength!" he roared, pounding his fist into my chest. The blow knocked me back a full inch. I was amazed, for never before had any creature short of another robot displayed such power.

He struck again, but this time I was braced. He gave a grunt of pain as his arm went numb.

I struck back, full in his ugly face, but only succeeded in staggering him a little. I was again astonished. The blow might have snapped the neck of a human. For my second blow, I used fully half my machine-power. My arm shot out like a steampiston. The alien flew back against the iron bars with a thud.

He came roaring back, to finish the fight, but now I saw the folly of my course.

"Cover me, men!" I yelled.

They understood. They milled about me so that I was lost in their numbers.

"Which one was it?" demanded Mog angrily. "Which one of you weaklings thinks he is stronger than I. Where is he?"

But luckily he couldn't pick me out, by sight. The light was dim and it had all been a swift blurr of action. All humans looked as alike as peas to them. His two companions pulled him back and calmed him down.

"Let him go," they admonished, half laughingly. "Next time don't pull your punches, Mog. Now we'll take our three."

They pulled their holster weapons this time, aiming at three men. Only a slight buzz sounded from the instruments. The three unlucky victims fell limply, all their muscles paralyzed. The three aliens carried them out, and the jail door clanged shut.

"Thanks, Adam Link!" Captain Taylor said simply, as some of the men attended to the victim I had saved. All the men looked at me, half in awe at my strength, half in gratitude.

"Forget it," I said. "I nearly gave myself away. I'll have to be more careful." I resumed where I had left off, before the interruption. For the present we will lay low and—"

"Lay low?" Captain Taylor suddenly blazed. "While Earth is doomed if we don't do something? While they take us out one by one, cutting into our numbers? No! If you haven't a plan, Adam Link, I have. Next time they open the door, we'll rush out in a body, fight our way through—"

"How far?" I asked sharply. "You humans are brave—but fools. How far would you get against an unknown number of them? And what is the way out? And what powers their guns? And what is their dome made of? And how many more space ships are coming? And how can this dome be sabotaged effectively? We have to know those things, instead of blindly rushing out to become corpses who died in fool-

ish glory!"

"You're right," Taylor muttered, subsiding. "But how are we going to find out? You can't get out of this cell to do any spying around."

"You forget who I am," I said without boastfulness. "There is only one kind of jail that could hold Adam Link. A completely solid steel chamber—if the walls were thick enough. Now be quiet, all of you!"

IT WAS late night now, in the outside world. And in this dome, the hum of activity floating down the corridors died gradually. The aliens slept at night, too.

I watched the single guard on duty outside our barred room. He was sitting in a chair-like support, leaning against the wall, bored at the thought of his all-night vigil. Gradually his eyes blinked, and closed. Sounds rumbled from his barrel chest. He slept.

"Now is my chance," I whispered to the men.

"How will you get out?" Taylor queried.

For answer, I strode to the bars, where the ends were buried in the cell wall. Bracing my feet, I tugged at a bar. My locomotor unit within hummed as rising horsepower fed into it. I kept an eye on the guard, but he slept heavily.

The bar was thick and strong, more resistant than any jail-bar of Earth, which I would have jerked away with one hand. Eve had to help me. Together, like metal Sampsons, we bent the bar. It came away suddenly, out of its socket. We loosened a half dozen more, forming an aparture wide enough to slip through.

The soldiers had watched with silent wonder. I faced them.

"Stay here. Too many of us would invite detection. Eve and I will scout, since we are the swiftest and strongest. We will try to be back before the guard awakes. Come, Eve."

A moment later we stood beyond the bars, in the hall. We bent the bars back into place. Even if the jailer woke for a while and looked around, he would not know of the two who had skipped.

Before we stepped away, I held Eve back against the wall.

"Photoelectric units across the front here," I warned. "To announce any jail-break. Hug the wall carefully, and we won't break the beam."

Cautiously, we slid sideways for twenty feet. Beyond that, the beams did not stretch. We were free! We strode silently down the corridor. It was dimly lit, as were all the passages during the night-period.

At the next cross-corridor, I paused. I pondered as to the general lay-out of the honeycombed dome.

"That searchlight," I told Eve, "must shine up from some room at the apex. We'll try to find it."

CHAPTER IV

The Space Ship

AFTER several twists, we came upon a passage whose floor sloped upward steadily. It was the one we wanted. We crept along like two metal ghosts, warily watching for aliens. One appeared, abruptly, a guard lounging on routine duty. From his niche shone a patch of bright light we would have to cross.

He was not asleep, though staring vacantly. We would have to distract his attention. Estimating the curve of his niche, I made a tiny clicking sound. With the mathematical precision known only to a robot-brain, I knew the sound would reflect in an acoustic curve, back of him.

He started, came to his hooved feet, and turned, wondering who or what was clicking in the wall back of him. While he thus surveyed the blank wall, Eve and I tip-toed across the lighted patch and melted into the shadowy stretch beyond.

Not long after the slope led us to what I calculated must be the center of the dome. I was sure of it when it opened out into a gigantic round chamber. There were lights burning within and aliens were at work. We hugged the doorway's shadow.

I ran my eye swiftly around. The room had a sliding roof, now closed, like the sliding roofs of astronomical observatories. In the center was a huge bowl-shaped object, surrounded by what seemed generators and other power producing-apparatus.

The signal-light!

From here, rolling back the roof, they shone their super-searchlight, guiding their scout craft back from all corners of a world as yet new and not fully mapped to them.

My quick, searching eye noticed two other things.

One, that large recesses, off from this giant room, held the ring of defense guns.

Second, and more arresting, there was a huge unfinished machine at one side. Workmen were on scaffolds around it. Somehow, with huge crystalline tubes and a maze of wires, it suggested a radio. A transmitter, perhaps, with which to signal their home-world, hurling radio waves far beyond the Heaviside Layer into space? It must be important to them, since this was a night shift at work.

We watched one workman. He was completing a strut-frame-work, enclosing a great tube. A tubular, hissing affair in his hand sprayed out smoky matter that instantly congealed to form the hard beams. It was miraculous, like forming something out of nothing. And forming something harder than steel, for it was the same material of the dome.

"How is it done?" Eve marvelled, in a whisper camouflaged by the noise they made. "They seem to draw it out of nowhere!"

"From the air," I said. "They are masters of plastics. They draw oxygen, nitrogen and carbon dioxide from the air and compress them instantaneously into dense plastics, ten times harder than bakelite or any metal. Earth is just exploring plastic science. Remember that auto manufacturer—Ford I think it was—who tried to dent a plastic body with an axe and failed?"

"How fast they work," Eve said. "It's almost like a spider spinning out his webb as fast as he can move."

"It accounts for the rapid construction of the dome," I nodded. "Joe Trent swore the dome was not here a month ago. The aliens landed less than a month ago. They built this whole dome in that short time. Any comparable structure would take Earth engineers at least a year. Let's look at the guns, Eve."

FOLLOWING a passage that led to the gun-emplacements, we approached the first. Dark and unattended, we could make little out except that it was surprisingly small—a mere ten-foot instrument of intricate design. But the guns must be super-powerful. They had shot Earth battleships out of the water, with one charge each.

By what principle? What did they shoot? How did they aim so accurately?

The answer came more quickly and completely than I wanted.

Without warning, an ear-shattering report sounded against the outside of

the dome. Then I caught the faint drone of aircraft. The American forces were making a desperate night attack, since the truce attempt had come to nothing!

In swift succession, dozens of bombs exploded against the dome. And below, from the giant room, the aliens began streaming toward the guns.

Eve and I were caught! In a moment aliens would be swarming past us.

"Pretend to be loading the gun or something!" I barked to Eve. "Bend over it."

An alien glanced into our dark recess, at our two huddled forms.

"Oh, someone here already?" he said, in the English they seemed bent on practicing to fluency. "Well, hurry up and fire. Chief Thorg has given us permission to bring a few down, for sport. But keep the lights off. The Earthlings might happen to have accurate enough bomb-sights to aim for the slits around the guns."

Keep the lights off! Luckily for us, that was the order.

But he hesitated a moment, waiting for us to make our first shot. Frantically, Eve and I were fumbling around the machine, without the least idea how to use it. I grabbed up a loose affair from a hook. It had trailing wires to the breech. It seemed to be a helmet. In lightning thought I clamped it around my head. It might be a sound-detector.

But now what? How to operate this baffling machine entirely different from any Earth gun I had ever seen. How to aim—

And then, magically, the tube moved, in its slot. The projecting barrel swung skyward toward the raiding planes. The supersearchlight was spraying its blinding radiance fanwise, into the heavens. It formed no definite mark for bombing, and it lit the planes starkly against the black sky.

My eyes fastened to one plane, beginning a bombing dive. With uncanny accuracy, my gun followed it. It had the aim, but now how to fire—

Thump!

The gun fired, at the thought. No shell belched out. Only a hissing, unseen charge. At the same instant, the plane I watched changed into a puff of exploded debris.

"Good!" said the watching alien, who was evidently the gunnery commander. "Now pick off a few more."

My eyes turned to another plane. How had I aimed and fired before—

With the thought, the gun swung and thumped. And the second plane vanished. I gasped. *Thought control!* The gunner's eyes were the sights. His thoughts aimed and fired. It was an ease and accuracy limited only by the gunner's rapidity in shifting his eyes from plane to plane and thinking—"aim! fire!"

What could I do? With the gun commander watching, I could only continue to blast planes down with my eyes. I felt like a Medieval witch with the Evil Eye, blasting all I merely looked at.

American planes! Human pilots! I was helping the enemy!

I DON'T know how many planes I ripped from the sky. Perhaps a dozen. Each was like a stab in my own vitals.

"Excellent!" the commander praised. "You're a better gunner than any of them. Keep it up. This is great sport, flicking out the puny Earthlings like flies. I'll see how the others are doing."

Mercifully—for me—he left.

I ripped off the headgear.

"God, Eve!" I groaned. "Earth has no chance against this weapon. It

shoots electric charges at the speed of light. And in essence, the aliens kill with their thoughts! Aim, fire! Aim, fire! As fast as they think it, humans die!"

All around the circumference of the dome's ring of recesses, guns were thumping. Plane debris rained down. It was aerial slaughter.

"Leave, you fools!" I almost shouted. "You have no chance at all."

They left, finally, with half their number gone. The guns fell silent. The aliens, crowing over their ghastly death-dealing, began filing back to their other job.

Eve and I remained at our gun, crouching behind it. Luckily no light had been turned on in the recesses. The gun commander glanced in, failed to see our rigid forms, and left.

AN hour later, when the workmen were absorbed completely in their job, we sneaked down the empty corridor and back to the prison. The guard we had fooled with acoustic ventriloquism was now asleep. The guard at the jail was half curled on the floor, dead to the world.

Our spying had been made possible only by the lack of alertness and discipline in the dome as a whole. The aliens had no need for rigid watch and attention. They had nothing to fear from the puny humans of the world outside.

They feared those within less.

Eve and I bent the bars and slipped into prison. In the morning, the awakened dome would not know of the two robot spies who had learned much —but not yet enough.

"What was the excitement about?" Captain Taylor asked. "We heard muffled thumps down here."

He and his men listened to our story with incredulous eyes.

"Thought-controlled guns!" Taylor mused. "If we could spike those, the dome would be defenseless—"

"For about a week," I cut in. "Earth forces would continue to bomb—and fail to chip off an atom. And in a week, the aliens would make new guns, with their plastic-magic. No, men. We have to get at the *root* of the dome. Somewhere they must have a generator that feeds the guns electricity. Probably an atomic-power unit. If I can find that—"

THE next night, Eve and I again sauntered out of prison. Again our jailer was sleeping away a watch that to him seemed totally unnecessary.

We roamed completely around the dome, looking for a central power-plant. We peered in bunk-rooms, in which aliens slept heavily. Supply rooms, stacked with boxes and plastic-cans of their food. The air-conditioning room, where a huge, silent machine piped cold air, normal to them, through the dome.

"If we could only find a room with weapons," I told Eve. "Distributed among the men, we would have an armed fighting force."

But there seemed no small-weapon supply, outside of those carried by the aliens themselves. Balked at every turn! We could not keep this night spying up forever. Sooner or later we would be discovered. Before that, we had to have some definite plan of action.

I reported no luck to the men, back at prison. They groaned in dismay. Each day several of them had been taken away, never to return. Our numbers were going down steadily. And the chill of prison was weakening those left.

"We've got to do something, Adam Link!" Taylor kept saying. "Can't

you think of anything?"

He was beginning to lose faith in me. All the men were. They expected Adam Link, from stories they had heard of me, to storm through the aliens like a metal tornado. They could not understand my slow, cautious course.

They did not know that Adam Link was afraid, for the first time in his life. That for once he was up against powers that appalled him. That even a robot must hesitate before beings of nearly equal strength, ability and science.

"Patience," I admonished. "Warsaw was not pulled down in one day."

THE third night, Eve and I explored all corridors leading down. Finally we found it—the power room. But it was completely sealed off. Diamond-hard plastic walls barred us.

We could only put our ears to the solidly locked doors and hear within the low, steady hum of the generator.

"Probably supplies a million megawatts to the guns above," I said. "Those guns blast like lightning, at a pressure of at least 500,000 volts. This plant could probably light half of America for a year. There is more power concentrated under this dome than in all the cities of Earth combined."

"But we can't get at it," Eve murmured. "We can't spike it."

"No, not yet," I agreed, filing the room's location away in my mind. If we could find some instrument or method of breaking into the power-room, it would be the answer.

We found another corridor winding down. It opened out into what I knew must be an underground space. It was wide, huge and dark. We did not make out the bulk in the center at first, till our eyes adjusted to the gloom. Light strayed from the corridor.

The object was 500 feet long, 100 feet wide, in a torpedo shape. It had no wings. From front and rear projected tiers of tubes, many fanning downward.

"It's their space ship!" I breathed. "With which they dropped down on Earth like a striking eagle. Let's look it over."

Undisturbed, we spent an hour there. Its hatch was open. The hull was empty, except for its motor. It had brought the aliens, all their supplies and equipment. It was stored away now, not needed except in the remote event of having to flee.

My scientific curiosity was feverishly aroused by the engine. Was it an atomic-power plant, spitting atom energy from the multitude of drive tubes? How far had it propelled the mighty ship through space? At what stupendous velocity?

I examined the machine with awe. No engine on Earth approached it. Autos, trucks, trains, ocean liners, zeppelins, crawled over Earth's surface at a snail's pace. This stupendous craft had plunged through the deeps of space.

"Eve!" I exclaimed. "Now we're getting somewhere. If I could once find out how to run this ship—"

How did it operate? But here I was completely stumped. The science of Earth was dumb before it. The science of Adam Link stammered in bewilderment. The control board was a maze of switches, relays, dials, rheostats, all numbered and designated with the alien's enigmatic figures.

"Only the aliens could tell us how to run it," Eve said. "And of course that's out of the question."

IRONIC situation! A plan was shaping in my mind. A plan to spike the dome. But one vital factor was missing—how to run this ship. And certainly the aliens wouldn't oblige, to

their own undoing.

"Still," I growled impotently to Eve, "we could wreck the thing."

"What good would that do?" Eve said. "Except to make them all the more determined to conquer Earth, having to stay?"

Another thing caught my eye, in a dark corner of the huge underground hangar. A dully glinting angular shape of metal. A tank! One of the captured tanks that they had driven in, perhaps for examination of Earthling war-machines. A pile of metal back of it told of the other tanks taken apart in the investigation. This one tank was left, probably as a museum-piece after Earth had been conquered.

"That tank, Eve!" I whispered. "It has guns, ammunition, armor-plate—"

Eve shook her head. "One tank and two robots against a dome-full of aliens?"

The odds were still against us. We turned away and slipped back to prison.

"Any luck?" Taylor asked hopefully, for his shivering, miserable men.

I shook my head.

"I still don't know how many aliens there are, altogether. That's vital. tomorrow night I'll try to get a count on them. And plan a course of action."

"Tomorrow night!" Taylor groaned. "Always tomorrow night. And each day six of us are taken away, one or two die from sickness, and we all go slowly mad!"

"Patience," I said wearily. "Tomorrow night I promise you a plan."

CHAPTER V

Jailbreak

AND then, as though to smash my careful course, aliens came that day.

They ran an eye appraisingly over our ranks, picking the three burliest men. Two were six-foot men, weighing over 200 pounds apiece. I was the third. I had tried to escape picking, hanging back as before, but this time they singled me out. I was in appearance, a sturdy human being.

"Come along," said the aliens, waving their guns. "If you don't come willingly, we'll paralyze you."

The two men shrugged, waved farewell, and stepped out without a word. I followed, without a word. There was nothing else to do. If I resisted now, and exposed myself, it would be too soon. Perhaps, before they were done with me, I would find out vital information.

I signaled Eve with my eyes not to worry about me.

We were led up the sloping corridor that I knew. It led to the apex of the dome, into the giant chamber of the signal-light, gun-recesses, and unfinished transmitter.

Workmen were just clambering down from the scaffolds around the latter. A space had been cleared and roped off, near the searchlight. Chief Thorg stood in the center, where we were stationed, and his men congregated around.

"You have been working hard, men," he said, still using the English language. "Our schedule has gone well. Now, as reward, you will have some other sport, since the Earthlings have given up attacking. Our best fighter will battle three humans at once!"

It was a sport arena!

A naked alien strode up. It was Mog, with whom I had exchanged blows once! By sheer coincidence, we were again pitted together. Malign coincidence. How could I fail to show my true strength this time? It would probably be a battle to the finish, like

the Roman gladitorial affairs of a past age.

The arena cleared. Mog, an ugly horned dwarf, swung his long arms and prepared to tackle us three. The spectators cheered, urging him on.

I swept an eye around, counting the aliens. Nine hundred and ninety-three, perhaps the dome's full force except for a few at watch-stations below. One thousand of the extra-terrestrial enemy, a formidable number! I filed the fact away in my mind. It was a vital factor and the final one—almost.

But now, what about Mog?

THE battle was short, ghastly. The two Earthmen bravely met Mog's charge, even running to meet him. Mog punched one to insensibility, with rapid blows, while the other clung to his arms futilely. Then he took them both by the scruff of the neck and cracked their skulls together. He dropped them, dead, and faced me.

I had hung back. Yes, I had let the two men die. I had to learn one more thing about the dome. I had to keep my human subterfuge. When Mog came at me, like a lumbering behemoth, I grasped him around the middle and hung on. Wildly he hammered at my back with his huge fists, but only wore himself down.

The watchers tensed. Who was this human who had hung back like a coward, and now seemed able to take any punishment?

"Oh, it's you!" Mog roared, finally recognizing me. "The strong one! I'll show you—"

He stooped and gave me a bear-hug, in return. His knotty arms squeezed with force that would have crushed every rib in a human body. It actually made my rivets squeak a little, under the plastic disguise and clothes. I couldn't resist squeezing back, taking care to measure out the force of it sparsely. All his breath came out, in a gust. His eyes swam dizzily.

I let him get his breath back, but thereafter he was weakened enough so that his blows came fewer. He kicked at me with his hooves, and gritted his teeth at the pain of nearly breaking his leg. He tried picking me clear off the floor and dashing me flat. I put my foot-plate back of his knee, and he very nearly wrenched his own arms out.

"Enough!" Chief Thorg said suddenly. "You are weakening, Mog. This Earth air is thin. Too much effort might harm you. You have furnished us sport. Now back to work, everyone. Guards, take the Earth prisoner to the vivisection room."

From bad to worse!

I had successfully come through the match, unrevealed as a robot. Now they would "vivisect" me! One thrust with a knife and they would know—

What now? Challenge them? Run and hide? I might have tried the latter, if there weren't so many present. But they would be after me like a pack. No, I would have to take my chances in the vivisection room.

THE vivisection room, somewhere below, was a grisly place.

Human corpses, in various degrees of dissection, lay on slabs. On one slab, a poor wretch was still alive. His naked body was covered with incisions and gore. An alien made one final cut. I steeled myself. No use to try to save him. He was too far gone. If I killed the alien torturer, the mangled human would die anyway a few minutes later.

The victim squirmed against his straps, gave a weak gasp, and expired. I relaxed. A robot cannot show it, but within me I was sweating in rage and pity.

My turn was next. Methodically, I

was strapped to a slab. Questions were hurled at me, first. Mental inquisition, for useful information.

"How many of you Earthlings are there on this planet?"

"Give you three guesses," I returned.

"How many cities on Earth? Where are the important ones located?"

"Oh, here and there."

"Which is your weakest continent?"

"The sixth one, at the South Pole. But watch out for the penguins!"

The alien glared, and lowered his horns, butting me with them in the side. I think he nearly broke his neck. He didn't try it again.

"Stubborn, like all the rest," he growled. "Well, I'll take you apart now."

He wrenched my clothes off.

"Peculiar specimen," he commented, bending over me.

I was. My plastic disguise was badly battered, both from the tank explosion and Mog's manipulations. Metal peeped forth here and there. And instead of my nose there was only a gaping hole.

The alien biologist peered up and down. Surely he must see. Any moment he would yell his discovery, that I was a robot. Then I would be forced to act and quickly—and still without a definite plan!

But he made no yell. His unaccustomed eyes still took me for a strange variety of the human. Some had been scarred, being soldiers by profession. This one was scarred more, that was all. I almost laughed in his face, calling him a fool mentally.

With quick efficiency, he wheeled an apparatus over that I knew instantly for an X-ray machine. He snapped a button several times, taking full-length prints of my interior. How amazed he would be to see the developed prints—wheels, wires and cogs! But that would not be for hours. I had gained that much time, if he did nothing more.

BUT now he poised a gleaming knife over me.

"This will hurt," he said bluntly, emotionlessly. "We are studying the nerve reactions of you humans under pain, for future reference."

He plunged the knife down. He made an incision in my chest just under the skin—or plastic. I squirmed, and gave a microphonic moan for his benefit.

He nodded, as though it checked with previous reactions. Again he incised what in a human was a delicate, painful nerve. Again I squirmed. But the farce could not go on. Had he forgotten that humans bled, when punctured?

I calculated my chances, preparing to spring up.

He jabbed the knife again, deeper this time. It met metal with a jar. Startled, he drew the blade out, staring at the blunted tip.

I sat up, snapping the straps like strings.

"Now you know," I said. "I'm a ro—"

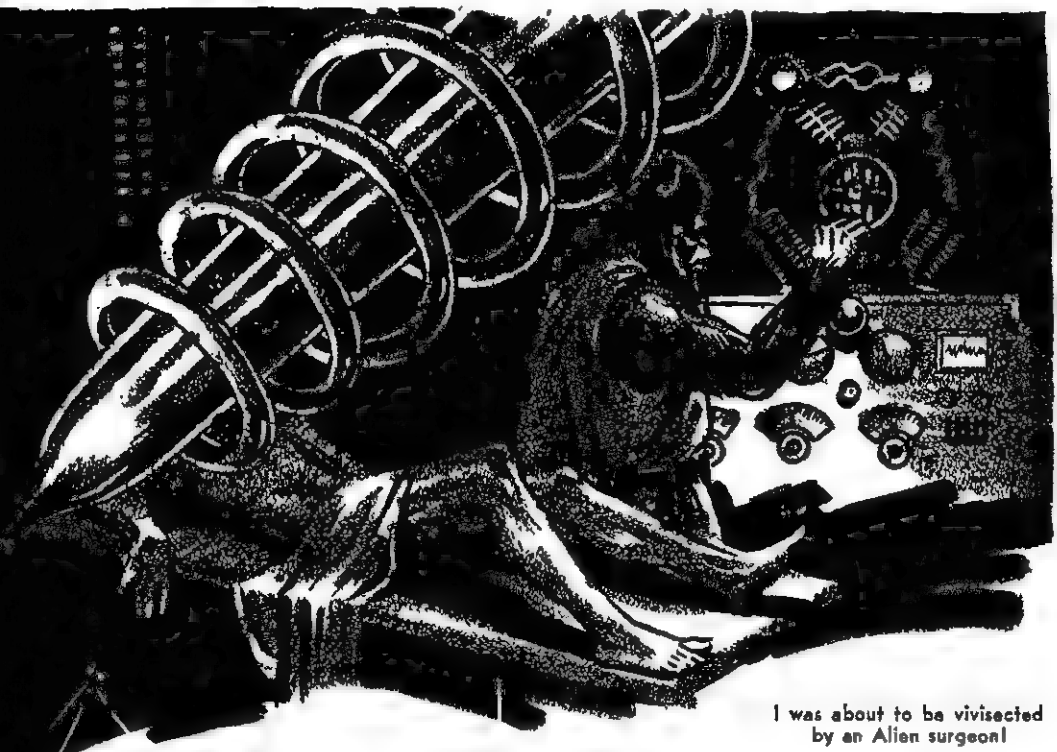
I was interrupted. A voice droned from a loudspeaker set in the ceiling.

"Our radio has just contacted Ship Two, which is now approaching the Solar System. Leave all posts and come to the Apex Room. Chief Thorg wishes to outline further plans, now that Ship Two is known to be coming."

The aliens in the dissection room looked at one another joyfully.

"Ship Two is coming!" one said. "It will be good to see some more of the fellows from home. Let's go. We'll take this prisoner below."

I was safe, for the time. The alien biologist was too excited to remember his bent knife now. They conducted me below, to the prison, then left.



I was about to be vivisected by an Alien surgeon!

THE men gathered around me eagerly. I was the first one ever to return, from the unknown horrors above. Eve touched me in the way I knew meant she was mentally sobbing in relief.

"How did you get back alive?" Captain Taylor asked. "What did you find out?"

I told the story. They clenched their fists, hearing of the brutal death of the two men in the arena, and shuddered at the horrible end of the vivisection victim.

"Murder!" Taylor hissed. "Plain stark murder and torture! And you didn't stop it, Adam Link!"

Suddenly they all drew away from me a little. I had let the tragedies occur right under my eyes, without lifting a finger. Humanly, they resented it.

"I couldn't expose myself," I said patiently. "I must continue to parade as a human, and find out one more thing—"

"Yes—find out how to escape!" one of the men piped up loudly. "It's clear now, Adam Link. You're afraid yourself. Afraid of being finished off, once they know you for a robot. All you're thinking of is your own safety."

Another soldier's voice rang hoarsely.

"I wouldn't be surprised if Adam Link was thinking of going in cohoots with the aliens! After all, Adam Link isn't human, either, and—"

"Shut up!" Captain Taylor commanded. But the protest was weak. He too was looking at me askance.

I was under suspicion. In one moment, in their confused human minds, I had changed from champion of the human race to deserter of the human race!

What could I do or say?

For a moment I wanted to shout at them angrily. For a moment, too, I

began to wonder if this human race were worth saving, with all their ingratitude, twisted psychology, and fool distrust.

But I spoke quietly.

"I will have to try to prove now where my loyalty lies. But it must be in my own way. I must know one more thing, before I am ready to act against them."

I strode to the bars and looked out into the hall. No guard was there.

"Now is my chance," I said. "They are all gathered in the Apex Room above, at conference. We'll go there, Eve and I, to eavesdrop."

The men said nothing as we slipped through our usual aperture after a moment's work, and stood in the hall. We angled past the photo-electric beams, which was always a tricky job.

"Safe," I breathed to Eve.

At that moment, like a thunderclap, a bell clanged. The alarm! The next second, I heard bells clanging all through the corridors of the dome. How had it happened?

CHAPTER VI

Adam Link Joins the Aliens

"LOOK!" Eve cried, pointing back. "The men followed us, and ran into the photo-electric beams!"

The soldiers were streaming out of the prison, as fast as they could wiggle through the opening I had neglected to close. I had not meant to come back to prison this time. The men congregated in the hall, ready to plunge for victory or death.

"Fools!" I yelled. "You've ruined everything!"

"Think we were going to stay and die like rats? Captain Taylor yelled back, face twisted. "You were going to join the aliens. Your whole idea, in coming to this dome, was to contact the aliens and make a pact with them, against the human race!"

I was stunned by the fantastic accusation.

"You didn't even give me the benefit of the doubt!" I groaned. "And now what are you going to do, with the aliens marching here?"

"Well, at least we have a fighting chance," Taylor growled.

But they didn't.

The aliens were already in sight, coming swiftly down the corridor from above. They drew their guns, seeing the escaped prisoners.

"Come on, men!" Taylor called the charge. It was magnificent bravery—but a bravery that deserved no respect. He took five steps, and crumpled to the floor, paralyzed. His men surged forward in a wave, and went down in a wave.

The aliens stood in a phalanx, spraying their paralysis-ray in the narrow passage. As fast as the front men fell, those in back were exposed and fell. In a short ten seconds, the whole human force lay limply on the floor.

It was a symbol of how easily the enemy from space could defeat all Earth, when they swept out.

The abortive jail-break was over. All the humans were down. The aliens had won. There was no one to oppose them.

No one? There were Eve and I!

It suddenly came to their notice that Eve and I still stood. The paralysis-ray had washed through our unfeeling metal bodies harmlessly.

Eve looked at me. This was the moment!

We were the champions of humanity! Eve waited for me to bellow the challenge, trample them down, and battle the rest in the dome. The men in back waited, conscious though helpless. It

had come to this—two mighty robots at last coming from behind human skirts and crushing the cruel raiders from the void.

They waited, as seconds ticked by.

But I did not bellow the hopeless challenge.

Curious, my thoughts were at the moment. The bitter episode of a moment before, in the prison, still etched like acid in my metal brain. Champion of humanity! Of a humanity that had scorned me since creation, reviled me, called me Frankenstein! For them I should battle these formidable beings. These beings from another planet who might, for all I knew *respect* me!

Yes, curious thoughts. Still, what was there to do? No matter how frightful the adds against me, I must fight.

I TENSED to spring. The head alien, Mog again, was aiming a different weapon, larger and more deadly looking. He would try this more destructive force against the strangely-standing two. I did not bellow a challenge —and warning. I would have to leap with deadly, silent speed, in action swifter than their reflexes.

But Mog was hesitating, looking me over closely.

"Wait," he grunted. "It's the noseless one again—the strong one! Who are you? You displayed strength near to mine, in the arena. And now, you stood up against the paralysis-ray, as no human does."

It clicked in his mind.

"You are not human!" he finished.

I tensed again. Knowing me for a robot, or at least a non-human, he would kill me the quicker.

Again he hesitated, pondering.

"While we were running up," he mused, "we heard you shouting. You were quarreling with the humans. And one of the humans said something about you two coming to our dome only to join with us. Is it true?"

I thought a long, burning, wondering second.

Then I nodded.

I looked at Eve. Did she understand what went on in my mind in that eternal, blinding second? She did.

"Adam!" she gasped. "You're deserting the human race?"

"Why not?" I snarled. "You saw a moment before how they turned against us!"

Mog was watching us narrowly, not quite certain of his own deductions. Finally he circled us, while his men kept us covered. He stood over the fallen Captain Taylor.

"Are those two of your human race?" he asked. "Are they your friends?"

Taylor could not speak, with a paralyzed throat. But the flash of hatred and denial in his eyes was answer enough.

"Come," Mog said, looking at me as one strong being to another. "This is very, very interesting. I will take you to Chief Thorg."

Chief Thorg received us in the Apex Room, where his short conference was already over.

Mog reported the jail-break incident, then eagerly told of his discovery.

"More than one intelligent race on this planet?" Chief Thorg said, surprised and thoughtful. "I thought myself you seemed somehow different. You are a race entirely diffrent from the human?"

I nodded. I did not want him to know, for the time being, that we were robots, *created* by the human race, and owing it that basic loyalty. Nor did I want him to know there were only two of us in existence.

"Race," he had assumed. It fitted in with my new decision.

EVE read my thoughts, as she always does with uncanny accuracy. That if robots were to have a place alongside the alien victors, Thorg must think we were a numerous and powerful group. Later, after a pact, I could quickly build up a robot force, and then really have my backing.

The aliens, I knew, were realists. They would not kill off Eve and me as Frankensteins. But they would kill us off simply as dangerous rivals, if they had the chance. Therefore, an intimation of force would result in compromise.

But Eve shrank from me a little. She clutched my arm in appeal.

"We cannot desert the human race, Adam, even if they hate us. This is their world, and our world—"

"Nonsense, Eve!" I snapped. "There can be no truce between our race and humans, ever!"

Eve gave up, and nodded.

"You're right, Adam. We would be fools to hope to patch up things with the humans. If only humans had not resisted us with such blind, backward, superstitious stubbornness. They made our lives a bitter struggle against ignorance and stupidity!"

Thorg listened to our tete-a-tete with sharp interest.

"I take it the human race hates your race. They have tried to exterminate you? How many of you are there?"

"We are not as numerous as the humans," I bluffed. "But we are far stronger, and hold our own easily. We have atomic-weapons. More than once we decided not to exterminate the humans, as we easily could have."

"A little soft-hearted," Thorg scoffed. But behind that was a deep respect for our avowed power. "You are scientific?"

I waved around.

"This dome is made of stable chain-carbon molecules compressed together so that they touch, isn't it? It is far stronger than porous metal. We have a weapon that can pierce it—vibration!"

Thorg started. The deductions had struck home. He was visibly impressed. By what I left unsaid, he could only assume that our "race" was able to resist humans—and the aliens too.

"Perhaps your race and mine can make a pact?" Thorg said cautiously. "Will you help us defeat the humans and enslave them?"

At that moment, I felt that the universe held its breath.

The decision was plain before me. It meant a complete reversal of loyalty. Champions of the human race we had been an hour before. Betrayers of the human race we would be now, if we accepted. The aliens were realistic-minded. They would give robots a place alongside them, on conquered Earth, realizing their worth and special abilities. They would not label us Frankensteins!

Humans had rejected me and my coming race. These aliens wouldn't. The decision was plain.

"What are your terms?" I asked.

"Complete and equal mastery over humans, along with us," Chief Thorg answered. "Definite terms will be agreed upon later, according to what parts of this planet you control, and what help you give."

"Good enough," I agreed. "As emissaries of our race, we will come to terms. But first, tell us who you are, where you are from, and what your plans are."

THORG'S story was strange and impelling. Again I have no proof of it. It will ring falsely, fantastically, to your stunted human minds that still arrogantly believe that in all the mighty

universe, only Earth was given life, and only man was given divine intelligence.

Eve and I waited breathlessly to hear his story. We had stepped out of the normal world and into this dome. With shock, we had laid eyes on the first alien beings ever to visit Earth. Curiosity consumed us, as to their origin and history.

"You are from Jupiter?" I asked. "The largest planet?"

Thorg shook his great horned head.

"We are from the star I think you call Sirius!"

Eve and I absorbed the shock of that. Not only were they from beyond Earth, but from beyond the Solar System. They were from another star!

"That's only logical," I said then. "Jupiter is frigidly cold, and probably has no breathable atmosphere. The other planets are likewise ill-adapted for life. It's likely that at all suns with a family of planets, only one or two have the right conditions to support life."

Thorg gave me a glance of respect for the deduction.

"Sound reasoning," he said. Our sun too has a family of planets—twelve. Only one supported life, our planet Korlo. Perhaps 25,000 of your Earth-years ago, our race achieved civilization and science. We passed through the Metal Age more than 10,000 years ago. Now we are in the plastic Age, manipulating matter and energy at will.

"A hundred years ago we achieved space ships, and colonized all our planets. Then, very recently, we cast our eyes out into the great void, swarming with stars. Our destiny lay out there, building an interstellar empire."

I nodded. Intelligence is restless. It ever seeks new worlds to conquer.

"Nearest to Sirius lay this sun, with a family of planets," Thorg resumed. "Powerful telescopes resolved the satellites, and this expedition was launched."

"Sirius is eight and one-half light years away," I said. "How long did it take you to arrive?"

"Seventeen of your years," Thorg informed. "Since we achieved half the speed of light."

Seventeen years in space! Eve and I marveled not at the time, but at the speed. Building up a velocity of 93,000 miles a second was no small feat.

"THIS has all been a great adventure," Thorg continued, his heavy, saturnine face lighting up. "Two other ships were previously dispatched to Earth, and were never heard from again. Either their engines failed in space, or they struck large, wandering meteors. This is the first ship to arrive. But now that the trail has been blazed, others will follow!"

He pointed to the great searchlight.

"This was built as a signal-light for our scouting aircraft, which we brought disassembled. But also for Ship Two to land near us. Two ships were sent on this expedition, a month apart. If one failed to arrive, the other might. But both won through without mishap. Ship Two is passing Pluto now. We will shine the light tonight. Ship Two will land beside the dome."

"Only two ships were sent to conquer Earth?" I asked dubiously. "The humans are many. It might take years to beat them to submission."

"We realize it is not a small job, though assured for us," Thorg returned. "No, not just two ships. Now that we have successfully arrived and scouted Earth, the main forces will follow."

He pointed to the giant transmitter, which busy workmen were hurrying to completion.

"It will be finished tonight, too. Then a message will be hurled back to our home planet."

"It will take eight and one-half years to arrive!" I pointed out.

"One hour," Thorg contradicted. "This is our long-range radio. It will project impulses through the sub-ether, at almost an instantaneous rate. The message will reach Sirius in an hour, telling of our success. Then a waiting armada will be dispatched. A hundred more ships. With those reinforcements, we'll conquer humanity overnight, when they arrive!"

It would not be for seventeen years. But in that time these first arrivals would consolidate their position, and scout Earth till they knew every city and gun and factory. When the time came for action it would be an overnight conquest.

"Good!" I said enthusiastically. "I see you have laid sound plans. I am glad to ally myself and my race with you of Sirius. You are making interstellar history. You are a great race! Bridging the void alone is a mighty achievement. The human race does not even have one space ship!"

"Would you like to see ours?" Thorg said proudly. "Come, I'll show it to you. But first—"

Without finishing the sentence, he led us to the prison room.

CHAPTER VII

Battle in the Dome

"WE ARE realists," Thorg said bluntly. "I need one proof of your pledge to our cause. Mog, bring out a human!"

Mog unlocked the prison door and pulled a man out by the arm. It was Captain Taylor.

"Kill him before my eyes, Adam Link!" Chief Thorg said.

I looked around. The tableau seemed to freeze. Thorg and Mog watched me narrowly, to see if I would kill the humans I avowed were my enemies. The men in the cage stared in frozen silence. Eve turned away a little. For all our decision, it would not be an easy thing to do.

Stonily, I strode to Captain Taylor. I placed my two hands around his neck, slowly squeezing. That would be best, strangulation. But I hesitated.

"Go ahead, Frankenstein!" Taylor taunted me, without flinching. "Surely the life of a mere man isn't going to stand in your—"

I clipped off the bitter denunciation. I squeezed. Taylor's face went purple. A moment later I dropped the limp body.

Chief Thorg clapped me on the back.

"You're with us all right, Adam Link! Mog, throw the corpse back in prison, so that the humans can mourn over their leader. Come, Adam Link. I'll show you our space ship."

When we arrived at the underground hangar, I did not tell Thorg that I had seen it once before. He might wonder why I had spied first, before joining him. I did not want our newly-formed alliance to be riddled with useless, unimportant suspicions. That was of the past, anyway, when I had been the thankless champion of humanity.

Workmen were there, just starting to dismantle the ship.

"Since we contacted Ship Two," Thorg explained, "we have no need for this ship, for emergency. We are getting rid of it. This underground space will be converted into barracks for the new arrivals."

He conducted us through the ship, explaining its various features.

"The space trip was not easy," he related. "Acceleration for a year pro-

duced a terrible ache in our bones and organs. Then, coasting for fifteen years, we had little to do but think back and think ahead. One man went mad, and was exterminated. Then deceleration for a year again. Arriving on Earth, we were half dead.

"But recuperation was quick, in Earth's light gravity. Our world is about Jupiter's size. We are used to three times more gravity than this. We feel light as a feather here. And it makes us proportionately stronger, far stronger than humans."

He was looking at me suddenly.

"You are strong, too, as Mog found out. Are you stronger than we are?"

"Perhaps a little," I laughed. "Tell me more of the ship. It intrigues me. How does the engine operate?"

"Thought-control," Thorg answered briefly. "As with our guns."

I GLANCED at Eve ruefully. Before, looking at the intricate engine, we had wondered how it operated. We had not thought of the mental-control, though that was so obvious.

A group of workmen passed us, approaching the engine.

"Careful while you dismantle it!" Thorg warned them. "It has its own power-plant. The power is still in the coils. Mog, you go and turn off all the switches first, so there won't be any accidents."

I glanced at Eve again. Power was still on, in the ship. If we had known that when first seeing it, and guessed at the thought-control, we might then have accomplished our original mission. But that was while we were still champions of humanity.

"I've wanted to ask you a question, Thorg—" I began, when a messenger came running from above. He thrust something in his chief's hands.

"What is this?" Thorg asked. "You are from the dissection room. Why are you so excited?"

"These are X-ray prints!" the other Sirian gasped. "They show—"

He held them out mutely. The prints would speak for themselves.

I knew what they showed. They showed a seeming human body, lying flat, all its insides revealed to the X-ray's penetrative eye. They showed wires, wheels and cogs!

I tensed, as Thorg began looking them over. What would his reaction be, knowing us at last for robots? Beings more alien to him than even humans!

"My question is this, Thorg," I went on imperturbably, as though ignoring the interruption as something unimportant. "If you failed to send the long-range radio message back to Sirius, would the follow-up armada come anyway?"

"No," Thorg said abstractly, looking over the prints with a puzzled eye. "Receiving no message, our people would assume we had been lost. Sending these ships is a costly proposition. They would give up coming to this sun at all, then, and try some other star."

"Thanks, Thorg!" I said. "That's all I wanted to know!"

"WHAT?" he said, still absorbed in studying the prints. Suddenly his eyes blinked, as the significance of the X-rays struck home. He looked up.

"You are a robot!" he accused. "A mechanical being!"

"Sure," I agreed. I went on rapidly. "You wanted to know how strong I was before. I'll show you—*now!*"

My fist drove into his face, with all the power of a machine behind it. Thorg's giant form toppled over backward, turning three somersaults, his horns and hooves alternately clacking

on the floor.

"The engine, Eve!" I yelled. "Before they touch it!"

Mog and his workmen had turned, at the swift, bewildering attack on their chief. There were twenty of them. Twenty of the towering giant monsters between us and the engine. They stood only a moment, as Eve and I bore down on them like express trains. Then they jerked out their guns.

The paralysis-rays went through us harmlessly. They had forgotten. But now Mog, aware of their uselessness, had drawn his other weapon. It was the one unknown factor left. Would it blast, like their cannon, blowing even metal to atoms?

"If he gets one of us, Eve," I told her swiftly without slackening pace, "the other goes on. You know what to do—"

Eve nodded.

Mog fired. The electrical bolt leaped to my body, with an impact that made me stumble. But it did no more than knock plastic off and scorch the metal. It was a hand-weapon designed to blast human flesh, or Sirian flesh, but not hard metal.

Mog stared in disbelief, as I came on unharmed. Then he fired again and again, blindly, at both of us. The other Sirians too. Bolt after bolt ripped into us. Our plastic burned and melted away.

One shot tore away my artificial ears and lips and hair-wig. My true metal face shone forth.

It takes long to tell this. But it was only seconds while we leaped toward them in great bounds. I try to imagine at times how profoundly astonished the Sirians must have been. Two seeming humans coming at them, changing under the blasts to two gleaming, powerful monsters of metal!

"Robots!" one of the Sirians screeched. "Intelligent machines—"

Then I was among them.

I cracked the first one on the skull so hard he sank without a groan, dead. I snapped the second one's neck with one sledge-hammer rabbit punch. I grabbed two necks and cracked their heads together, flinging the limp bodies aside. Giants they were, half again as high as I was, but I pulled them down to my level for blows. Eve was beside me, punching with the rapidity of a rivet-hammer. And with all its horsepower.

It was a grand fight. A soul-satisfying fight. With each blow, I hissed the name of one of the prisoners who had gone to the dissection room. With each death, I counted one Earth plane pilot paid for.

GIANTS they were, hulking monsters of incredible strength. But they had no chance. Their blows against us served only to break their arms. They kicked viciously with their hooves, and howled in pain as the anklebone went numb or snapped. They stooped and butted with their short, wicked horns, and succeeded only in stunning their brains. In turn, Eve and I butted with our metal skulls, at times, with enough force to cave in a chest with the muffled sound of cracking ribs.

Eve and I were at last exerting our full mechanical fury, against which no biological being could stand unless it might be a dinosaur. The Sirians were gigantic and strong, yes, alongside humans. But to us they were overgrown rag dummies.

It was a glorious fight. The hulking behemoths went down steadily.

"Come on, you Sirian thugs!" I yelled. "Meet Adam Link, the robot. My wife, Eve. Pleased to kill you!"

The last two tried to flee, shrieking,

from the two beserk metal whirlwinds. I overtook one. Eve caught the other. We swung them around our heads, by their heels, banging them together till they were bloody broken shreds. We were laughing, shrieking in joy.

I cannot explain this orgy, except that all our pent-up hatred and rage and revulsion against the Sirians had come to a head. It is like a human stamping again and again on a snake with boots, long after it is dead, with overcharged hatred.

OUR shrieking stopped, as a sound penetrated to our ears. It was a hissing bolt-blast, followed by a tinkling crash.

"We forgot Mog!" Eve yelled. "He's at the engine, smashing the controls!"

I was already leaping to the front of the ship, where Mog was aiming his second blast among the drive-apparatus. I jerked the gun away, so that the blast sped harmlessly against the hull. Mog whirled with a snarl of rage and fear.

"Twice before we battled, Mog," I said, "without coming to a decision. Now—"

It was brief. I grabbed up his nine-foot body like that of a child. I bent him across my chest, as once he had brutally bent a human across his. I slowly pulled as he screamed in pain. The scream clipped off as a sharp snap told of his spine breaking like a twig. I tossed the corpse aside.

I looked around. All the Sirians down here were dead.

Except one.

"Look!" Eve pointed. "Thorg recovered!"

I had not killed Thorg, only dealt him a blow. He had crawled to the door and dashed through it, escaping.

"Let him go," I said. "Let him tell his men of the two metal demons who will defeat them. And we will, now that we have this ship. We know how to run it now—by thought-control!"

Eve and I clasped hands happily. It was the last factor in the plan that had slowly shaped in my mind during the spying.

"Good job you did, Eve," I commended her sincerely. "Acting the part so superbly of turning against the human race, for the benefit of the Sirians. You even had me fooled for a while!"

"And you had me worried!" Eve returned, sighing in relief. "For a while I thought you might actually mean it! Especially when you took poor Captain Taylor and . . . but you had to do it."

I laughed.

"Taylor isn't dead," I said. "I didn't strangle him. I slipped a finger over a vertebra below the back of his neck and pressed hard. You know the delicate nerve there. Pressed or knocked, it renders the victim unconscious. But not dead. Taylor's alive."

"Adam, you darling!" Eve said. "Our hands are clean after all. Now—"

She was interrupted by the sound of clattering hooves down the corridor, approaching this underground hangar.

"No time to lose," I said hurriedly. "All we have to do now is start this ship's engine and—"

I SLIPPED the thought-helmet over my head.

"Come to life—start—operate!" I commanded mentally in a dozen different ways.

There was no reaction from the mighty engine. I tried vainly for another minute. At the gun, my merest thought had swung it, aimed it, fired it. What more was needed here?

Eve clutched my arm, pointing.

"Mog fired one shot at the controls. Look there—he damaged it!"

I looked. A dozen wires had been

blasted out of what seemed a main and vital unit of the complex mechanism.

Ruined! The ship's drive mechanism was ruined, and with it my great plan. We had only killed off twenty aliens. There were 980 of them left. A formidable force. I could not storm up and wade into them all. Their combined hand-weapon bolts would eventually damage me, defeat me.

I might kill a hundred or two. Hundreds would be left. And the dome would be intact. Ship Two would land tonight, with reinforcements. In one crushing moment, all my carefully planned schemes had smashed.

"I've failed, Eve!" I groaned. "They'll win, now. Our only hope was getting this ship into operation!"

"Can you repair it?" Eve suggested. "I'll try to hold off any attack for a while—"

"Repair it?" I said hollowly. "Repair an engine I never saw or heard of before? I might—if I had enough time. But they won't give us time."

Hopelessly, we prepared to battle to the end. We heard the thunder of Sirian hooves, like a herd of buffalo, and they appeared at the far end of the hangar.

I ran forward and picked up Mog's bolt-gun. I slipped three more from dead aliens and handed two to Eve. We stood shoulder to shoulder and fired. We blazed away, like two metal gunmen, with a pair of guns each, in a battle to the finish.

The first few Sirians that darted from the corridor went down with smoking holes blasted in their bodies by the lightning we hurled. It was no trick to us to handle the guns, and our aim was mechanically without error. Then they came thundering out in a body, at least a hundred of them, spreading in a semi-circle in the large space.

The lightning bolts lanced back and forth.

EVE and I, with our precise aim, picked them off like clay pigeons. But the last twenty surged near enough to blast us with a fusillade of shots. Some of our rivets cracked away. A frontal plate or two loosened. If our inner vitals were exposed, one shot within would short-circuit us and burn out our brains.

We divined Thorg's desperate plan. Knowing he was up against formidable metal beings who acted fast, he would destroy us fast. At any cost. Even if it took all his men, he would finish us. Better for Ship Two to arrive at a dome empty of Sirians and robots alike, rather than arrive at a dome held by the robots.

A wave of another hundred Sirians spilled out next.

Again Eve and I shot them down with our unerring swiftness. But again, appallingly, rivets flew loose and metal slowly weakened. One shot had clipped away one of my neckbolts, so that a flange dropped away. The next electrical bolt in there would bore into my neck-cables, run up the wires, and blast my brain.

"The next attack," I told Eve somberly, "will get us. Earth is doomed after all!"

"If only Captain Taylor and his men had weapons and could attack from the rear!" Eve said hopelessly.

I started.

"Eve! The weapons are there—on the downed Sirians. Hurry, let's gather them before the next attack!"

We ran among the dead and piled up a hundred bolt-guns. Enough to arm all the prisoners.

"Get these to the men," I said to Eve. "Have them attack from the rear. Keep the Sirians occupied. Give

me one hour if you can. One hour to repair that engine!"

Our plan was desperate, but simple.

When the next wave of aliens boiled out, two hundred of them this time, they withered before the thunder of an Earth tank's gun. We had remembered the tank stored here. Eve was inside, with the bolt-weapons.

Guns spitting, she rumbled the tank forward, plowing through their ranks. The tank darted into the clear corridor back of them, knocking down the last few Sirians in the way. Then it churned madly down the hall, toward the prison.

"Good luck, Eve!" I shouted.

"Godbye, Adam!" her voice drifted back, above the rumble of the engine.

CHAPTER VIII

Adam Link's Reward

YES, goodbye it might be! I swung on the aliens with a snarl. They had forced me to separate from my mate. It always drove me beserk, when Eve was in danger. I would kill—kill—kill—

But only twenty stayed to duel with me. The remaining force, at an order, gave chase to Eve. They realized the threat she would be, at their backs.

Two guns blazing, I shot down fifteen of the twenty. Then my guns were empty. I did not waste time picking up fresh guns from among the dead. I waded into the last five, defying their bolts, like a metal madman. None had made a vital shot.

I picked up one and flung him to the ground as pulp. The second I bowled over and stamped on. I tore the head of the third from its trunk. I punched the fourth so hard my alloy fist sank half-way into his chest. The fifth and last I flung over my head against the wall, with a wet thud.

I was free from attack, for the time being.

I listened at the door. Faintly, I heard the joyous shouts of Taylor's men, drifting down from the halls above. Eve had reached them, killed the guard, yanked open the bars, and distributed the weapons. Already their barks sounded. And the tank's rumble resumed, as a spearhead formed behind it.

We had a rear-attack fighting force now!

I calculated the possibilities. Less than a hundred humans against 600 aliens. The Sirians would win, of course. The tank might confound them for a while, but they would barricade it off in some corridor and force the charging Earthmen to fight hand-to-hand. In the narrow hallway, with bolts sizzling thickly, Eve too would be doomed. . . .

But it would give me time now to look at the engine. Repair it, if possible.

I ran back, and looked the damage over.

I must make another fantastic statement here. I had never seen a space ship before, or even dreamed of one. I knew absolutely nothing of its principle or intricate design, fashioned by alien minds.

Yet in one hour I knew its essential features.

One hour I was free from molestation. The armed and freed Earthmen were putting up a heroic battle. Thorg knew he had to wipe out this armed menace in his midst, before he could come after me.

I could hear the sounds of battle. The triumphant, joyful shouts of the Earthmen, as as last they struck back at the aliens. Captain Taylor's voice was loudest of all, deploying his men in the corridors, sniping, charging, with-

drawing, doling out his men's lives for the largest possible price. And for the longest slice of precious time. The tank's rumble sounded periodically, as it was used to spearhead a sortie, or to cover a strategic retreat.

Humans and robots, united again, were making history under the dome.

One hour they gave me.

One hour in which I examined 5000 engine parts, wires, condensers, tubes, spark-chambers. And then I knew. Knew that the dozen wires Mog's one vital shot had destroyed should be replaced and hooked up in such and such a manner. Wire I took from a bolt-gun's coil. I made the last connection. I slipped the thought-helmet over my skull.

Would it work? Or would all those humans go down for nothing?

EVEN as I adjusted the helmet with feverish haste, the battle sounds died. The shouts of men trailed to dying echoes. They had spilled their blood, to the last man, buying an hour with their lives.

And Eve! The tank's rumble was absent. It had been wrecked. Had a bolt finally ripped into Eve's battered metal body and blasted within? No sound from her. She was gone, too!

Savagely, I commanded the engine to come to life. Obediently, a hum rose back of the panels, as mighty forces came to life and awaited their metal Aladdin's next wish. I began to give the mental order.

"Adam! Adam!"

It was Eve's voice, far down the corridor! Her metal feet pounded, louder and louder. Hooves pounded after her. The last 500 of the Sirians pursued her, to finish the battle underground where it had started.

Eve's flying metal form burst from the corridor. Sirians followed, blazing away. A hail of lightning sparkled against her alloy plates. Eve stumbled half-way to the ship. She was badly hurt. A lightning-bolt spanged against the back of her skull, where metal had oxidized away under heat.

Eve fell with a crash and lay still. I was there in two huge bounds. I swept up her limp form. It was silent, lifeless. She had paid the price, too, along with Taylor and his men.

I would not wish to describe my feelings of that moment. Earth was saved, but the universe had turned dark, to me.

I ran back to the ship's controls.

"Rocket tubes fire!" I commanded the engine. "Rear and front together, at equal rate!"

Instantaneously, livid flame shot from the multitude of drive tubes. With equal forces from back and front, the ship itself did not move. But all the hangar was filled with a dense, choking, poisonous exhaust gas. This had been my plan.

I turned to watch. With savage satisfaction, I saw all the Sirians racing forward stop, stumble, and claw at their throats. By the dozens they dropped, then hundreds, as the clouds of gas billowed over them. They had lungs. The lungs filled with vapors that choked out their lives. The 500 aliens died in their tracks.

Chief Thorg was among them. I watched him curl to the ground, double up, and die in agony. I gazed down at Eve's dead form. His death soothed, perhaps by a millionth part, the blind agony within me.

I let the rockets blast out for fifteen minutes, filling the whole dome with its poisonous vapors. No being could be alive now. No last lurking Sirian who might be at some watch station.

Only Adam Link was alive now, without lungs to be seared.

I commanded the engine to stop.

Then I sat before Eve, in the dead quiet.

HOURS later I arose. It was night now. Ship Two was due to arrive, If my metal face could have showed it, I was grinning within. A deadly, ghastly grin.

The beacon light shone that night, guiding to Earth the space ship that had plummeted across the gulf of space from Sirius.

The mighty craft lowered from the clouds, rockets drumming. It dipped in salute. Within were 1000 yelling, cheering, rejoicing Sirians, eager to step out on the planet they were to conquer.

I was at a gun. The mighty ship was limned clearly by the searchlight.

"Fire—fire—fire—fire!"

My eyes moved like a raking machine-gun along the length of the ship. The gun thumped in unison, blowing gaping holes in the craft. It broke in gyrating shreds. Horned figures spilled out and fell to the dome.

When the rain of debris had ceased, all was quiet again. Ship Two had arrived.

But no more would.

With my shoulder against one support of the giant long-range radio, I shoved. The framework toppled, bringing the entire machine down with a crash. I stamped all its parts to bits.

Then I looked up, out of the slide-roof, singling Sirius out of the starry hosts. I laughed. Two robots had dealt that mighty sun a staggering blow.

No, one robot.

I went below, again. I picked up Eve's dead form and held it in my arms. Then I gave commands to the engine.

With a powerful bellow, the rear rockets burst forth. The gigantic craft rammed forward, like a caged lion. Its sharp prow plowed through thin partitions, as through cheese.

"Faster! Faster!" I commanded.

Like a great battering ram, the ship speared for the central power-room of the dome. The nose crunched against the protecting walls, broke them down. The atomic-power generator they had used hummed busily in the center, still automatically gushing untold energy into the storage coils.

The ship plowed into the whole unit, cracking screens. Unleashed energy leaped forth.

"We will be together, Eve," I said. "Even in death."

The cosmos blew up. A million megawatts of raging fury expended itself in one titanic explosion.

The mind of Adam Link blinked out. I wished it so, following Eve into the unknown.

BUT the mind of Adam Link blinked into being again. I was alive!

"Eve, how can this be?" I stammered.

We were sitting up, staring around. We were at the edge of a broken cliff. Ocean-waves were dashing against the new cliff shore. The explosion had not only blown the dome to atoms, but it had severed the entire headland from its matrix. No sign remained of the dome's former site. It was all washed over by lapping, swirling waters.

And we were alive, at the edge of the shism!

One thing had survived with us, from the dome. The blunt prow of the space ship. It had been blown up and away, integrally, with two unconscious metal forms flattened against it. We had landed, with freakish gentleness, in soft sand.

"The prow," Eve said, "was probably designed to withstand head-on collision with any but the largest meteors

in space. It held up and saved us."

I nodded—and then suddenly stared at Eve, aghast.

"You're dead!" I gasped. "Eve, you're dead—"

"*Seemed* dead, perhaps," Eve corrected. "The bolt singed my brain, knocking me unconscious. Evidently this jar jolted me back to my senses."

I arose, then, hammering my metal fists against my metal chest. Like a metal Tarzan, I gave a bellow of pure triumph. I shook my fist up at the star Sirius.

"Set you back on your heels, didn't I?" I shouted. "In all the universe, no creatures can stand up against Adam Link—"

My legs crumpled suddenly. The chest-beating had loosened a wire within, short-circuiting my locomotor center. I collapsed and sprawled on the ground, helpless.

"Good for you," Eve chided as she took off my chest plates and worked over me. "You bragging fool! It was more luck than brains."

EVE was right. But when a grey ship nosed over the horizon, at dawn, I ran to shore eagerly, to meet its launch.

Joe Trent stepped to shore, with the battleship's captain and fleet-commander.

"Adam Link!" Trent greeted. "How did you do it? You blew the dome up somehow?"

"I did," I returned proudly. "Sabotage with a capital S. You see, I rammed their space ship smack into the atomic-power unit and—"

Trent and the others listened, puzzled.

"Space ship? Atomic-power unit? What are you talking about?"

"The aliens," I said. "The aliens who built the dome—"

"Yes, of course, the aliens," Trent nodded. "But *which* aliens? All Europeans are aliens, naturally. Tell us, was it the foreign power we expected it was?"

"Don't you understand—" I began, but Eve shook her head at me. I knew what she meant. There was not one stick or stone left of the dome. Adam and Eve Link had seen the aliens, but no other eyes except the eyes of men now dead.

My voice ground to a stop. Trent and the others were patiently waiting to hear which foreign power had been so close to invading America.

"It was Nazi Germany," I said. "But the danger is over now. They won't try again."

Trent stepped forward, taking my hand.

"I thank you, Adam Link, in behalf of America! You will get the Congressional Medal of Honor for this!"

"Of course," I murmured. "But the medal will never be recorded in the records of the country for the truth . . ."

"The world would never believe!" Eve whispered.

Perhaps it is better that they do not.

THE END

« THAR'S GOLD IN THEM THAR METEORITES! »

NATIVE gold panners of Batobalani, Philippine Islands, have a bizarre superstition concerning ways and means of increasing their output. After they have made a good day's haul they place their gold in a dark place alongside of a tektite, which is a glass-like nodule of mysterious origin believed by many to be a form of meteorite. This is supposed to increase their pannings. They call the tektite "wife or companion of the gold" and have great faith in its creative facilities.

—O. M. Qontine.

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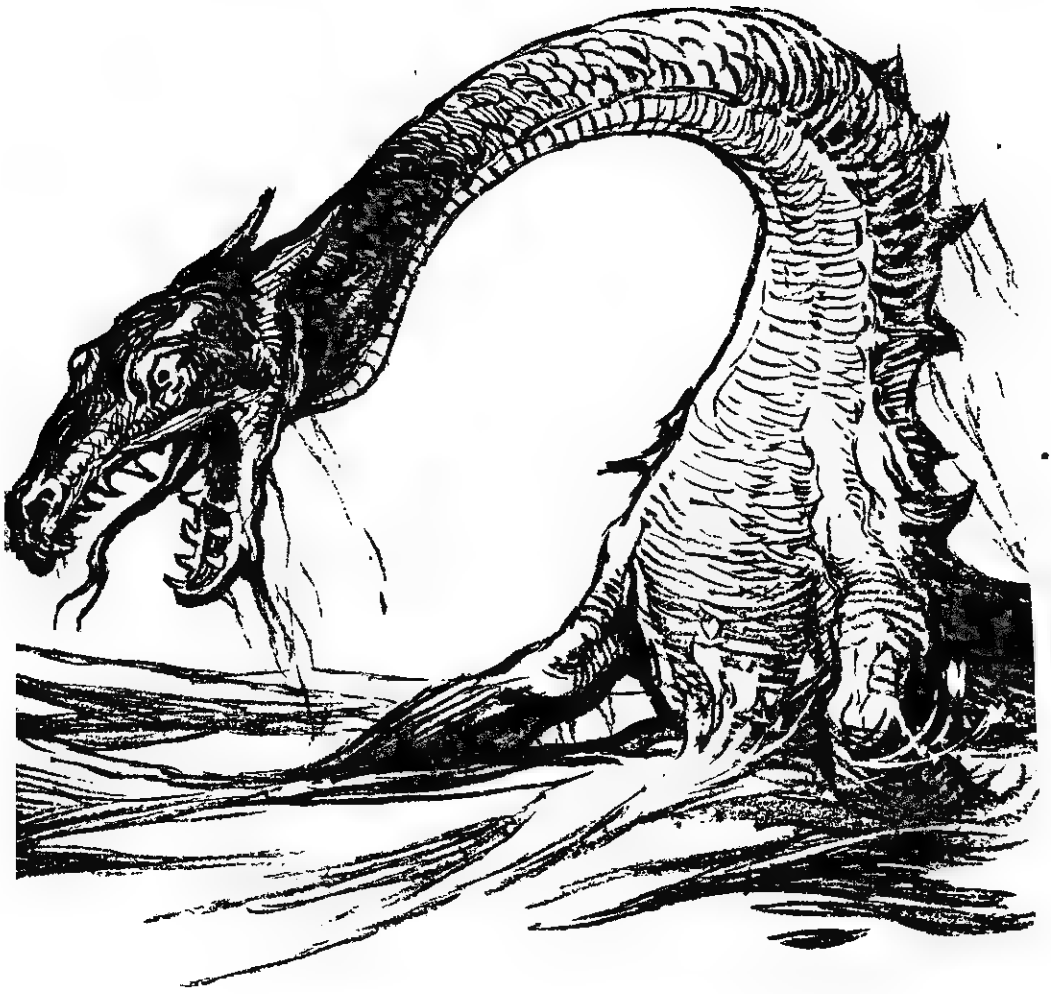
TIGER GIRL

by EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS

Into the Sea Of Nowhere sailed Dian and her captor. No one had ever sailed it before . . .

Gamba drew back his bowstring to its utmost . . . the monster was upon them



"YOU say there is another shore," said Gamba to Dian; "perhaps there is, but we shall never reach it."

"We can try," replied the girl. "Had we remained in your land we should surely have been killed, either by the savages of which you told me, by the wild beasts, or by your own people. If we must die, it is better to die trying to reach safety than to have remained where there never could be safety for us."

"I sometimes wish," said Gamba, "that you had never come to Lolo-lolo."

"You don't wish it any more than I," replied the girl.

"We were getting along very well without a Noada," continued the man, "and then you had to come and upset everything."

"Things should have been upset," said Dian. "You and Hor were robbing the people. Pretty soon they would have risen and killed you both, which would have been a good thing for Lolo-lolo."

"I might not have gotten into all this trouble," said Gamba, "if I hadn't fallen in love with you. Hor knew it; and he made that an excuse to turn the people against me."

"You had no business falling in love with me. I already have a mate."

"He is a long way off," said Gamba, "and you will never see him again. If you had come to my house and been my wife before all this happened, you and I could have ruled Lolo-lolo as long as we lived. For a bright girl, it seems to me that you are very stupid."

"You were stupid to fall in love with me," said Dian, "but in a moment it may not make any difference one way or another—look what is coming," and she pointed.

"Pu be merciful!" cried the man. "This is the end. I told you that we should not come out upon this water which stands on end and is filled with death." *

A great head upon a slender neck rose ten feet above the surface of the sea. Cold, reptilian eyes glared at them, and jaws armed with countless teeth gaped to seize them. The creature moved slowly towards them as though knowing that they could not escape, the water rippling along its glossy sides.

"Your bow and arrow!" cried Dian. "Put an arrow into its body at the waterline, and bend your bow as you have never bent it before. When it comes closer we will use our swords."

Gamba stood up in the canoe and drew a three-foot arrow back to its very tip; and when he released it, it drove true to its mark; burying two-thirds of its length into the saurian's body at the waterline. Screaming with pain and hissing with rage, the creature seized the end of the shaft and

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* In this ever-changing world it is sometimes difficult to keep abreast of historical events, but who is there who does not know of that strange, stone age world at the center of the earth, which was discovered by David Innes and Abner Perry many years ago? Into this stone age world they brought some of the blessings of civilization, such as gunpowder, rifles, and cannon. They built a navy and established a federation of states, which they called the Empire of Pellucidar. Perry even built an aeroplane, which would not fly, and a balloon, which did; and which broke loose and carried Dian the Beautiful, David Innes' mate, into a strange land beyond the nameless strait which connects the Sojar Az with the Korsar Az; and forms the southwestern boundary of the land mass where lies the land called Sari, which is the home of David Innes and Dian the Beautiful and Abner Perry.

Down upon this strange land, near the farther shore of the nameless strait, drifted the balloon in which was Dian the Beautiful. It was a strange, a terrifying, land to her, this terra incognita of her people; but she was well received, for the yellow race which inhabited that portion of the country felt that she must be a goddess coming down out of the heavens; and they treated her as such until Hor, the high priest, fearing her increasing power, turned the people against her, and Gamba, the king; so that they barely escaped from the city with their lives.

With bronze swords and bronze daggers and fire, they constructed a canoe and set forth upon the waters of the nameless strait in an attempt to cross it and reach the continent where lies Sari, while David Innes drifted southward from Sari in another balloon which he had had Perry build, in the hope that thus he might find Dian.

At the same time, Hodon the Fleet One, with a small ship and a few warriors, was searching the vast Lural Az for O-aa, whom he knew to be drifted upon the ship Sari.

The wind and a powerful ocean current had carried the Sari and little O-aa into the nameless strait and thrust her ashore near the city of Tanga-Tanga. Here she was seized upon by the people of Tanga-Tanga, who had fought with the men of Lolo-lolo for possession of Dian the Beautiful when her balloon had grounded between the two cities. They had lost Dian the Beautiful; now they had another Noada, or goddess, in the person of O-aa, who was making herself unpopular with the high priest and the king by tossing the money offerings which the people brought to her temple back to them; because, being a girl of the stone age, she knew nothing about money; and it delighted her to see the people scramble for it.

This is all history, with which, of course, you should be familiar.

jerked it from the wound; and with it came a stream of blood spurting out and crimsoning the surface of the water. Then, still hissing and screaming, it bore down upon the two relatively puny humans in the frail canoe. Dian was standing now, her bronze sword grasped tightly in one hand, her bronze knife in the other. Gamba drove another arrow into the reptile's breast; and then dropped his bow into the bottom of the canoe and seized his sword.

NOW, as though by magic, hundreds of small fishes, about a foot long, attracted by the blood of the saurian, were attacking the maddened creature, which had paused to wrench the second shaft from its breast. Ignoring the voracious, sharp-fanged fishes which were tearing it to pieces; it came on again to attack the authors of its first hurts. With arched neck it bore down upon them; and as it struck to seize Dian, she met it with her bronze sword; striking at the long neck and inflicting a terrible wound, which caused the creature to recoil. But it came on again, raising a flipper with which it could easily have overturned or swamped the frail craft.

Gamba, realizing the danger, struck a terrific blow at the flipper while it was still poised above the gunwale of the canoe; and so much strength did he put into it that he severed the member entirely; and simultaneously Dian struck again at the neck. The great head flopped sideways, and with a final convulsive struggle the saurian rolled over on its side.

"You see," said Dian, "that there is still hope that we may reach the other shore. There are few creatures in any sea more terrible than the one which we have killed."

"I wouldn't have given one piece of bronze for our chances," said Gamba.

"They didn't look very bright," admitted Dian, "but I have been in much worse dangers than that before; and I have always come through all right. You see, I did not live in a walled city as you have all your life; and my people were always open to the attacks of wild beasts, and the men of enemy tribes."

They had taken up their paddles again, but now they were out where the full strength of the current gripped them; and they were moving far more rapidly down the strait than they were across it. Because of the current it was hard to keep the bow of the canoe pointed in the right direction. It was a constant and exhausting struggle. They were still in sight of the shoreline they had left, though the distant shore was not yet visible.

"We're not making very much progress in the right direction," said Dian.

"I am very tired," said Gamba. "I do not believe that I can paddle much longer."

"I am about exhausted myself," said the girl. "Perhaps we had better let the current carry us along. There is only one place that it can take us and that is into the Korsar Az. There, there will be no strong current and we can come to shore. As a matter of fact, I believe that we can get much closer to Sari along that coast than we would have been if we had been able to paddle directly across the strait. So Dian the Beautiful and Gamba the Xexot drifted along the nameless strait toward the Korsar Az.

BORNE along by a gentle wind, David Innes drifted down across the Land of Awful Shadow toward the end of the world and the nameless strait, in the balloon which Abner Perry had named the Dinosaur II. He

knew that his was an almost hopeless venture, with the chances of his balloon coming down near the exact spot where Dian had landed almost nil; and even if it did, where was he to look for her?

Where would she be, in a strange land, entirely unknown to her, provided that she was still alive, which seemed beyond reason; for, supplied with warm coverings as he was, and provided with food and water, he had already suffered considerably from the cold; and he knew that Dian had been without food, or water, or covering of any kind, other than her scant loincloth, at the time that her balloon had broken away.

Yet somehow he thought that she was not dead. It did not seem possible to him that that beautiful creature, so full of life and vigor, could be lying somewhere cold and still, or that her body had been devoured by wild beasts. And so he clung to hope with an almost fanatic zeal.

At last he came to the nameless strait, across which he had never been. He saw the waters of it below him, and far to his right two figures in a canoe. He wondered idly who they might be and where they might be going upon those lonely, danger-ridden waters; and then he forgot them and strained his eyes ahead in search of the farther shore, where, if at all, he felt sure that he might find his mate.

His balloon was floating at an altitude of only about a thousand feet when he approached the opposite side of the strait. His attention was attracted by two things. On the beach below him lay the wreck of a dismasted ship, which he recognized immediately; for he and Perry had designed her and superintended her building. He recognized her, and he knew that she was the *Sari*.

The other thing that had attracted his attention was a walled city, not far from the shore of the nameless strait. He knew that O-aa had been aboard the *Sari* when she had been abandoned by her crew; and he realized that perhaps O-aa had been captured by the people who lived in that city.

The presence of a walled city in Pellucidar was sufficiently amazing to arouse many conjectures in his mind. In a walled city there might live a semi-civilized people who would have befriended O-aa; and if Dian had landed near it, she might be in the city, too; or the people might have heard something about her, for a balloon would certainly have aroused their interest and their curiosity.

Now he saw that his balloon had accomplished that very thing; for people were running from the city gates, staring up at him, and calling to him. They might be cursing and threatening him, for all he knew; but he decided to come down, for here were people, and where there were people there would be rumors; and even the faintest rumor might lead him upon the right track. So he pulled the ripcord, and the Dinosaur II settled slowly towards Tanga-tanga.

AS THE basket of the balloon touched the ground David Innes found himself surrounded by yellow-skinned warriors, wearing leather aprons painted with gay designs, that fell from their waists both before and behind. On their heads were leather helmets; and they carried swords and knives of bronze, as well as bows and arrows.

Some of the warriors shouted, "It is Pu. He has come to visit our Noada."

"It is not Pu," cried others. "He comes in the same thing that brought the false Noada of Lolo-lolo."

David Innes understood the words, but not the purport of them; only that the reference to the false Noada who had also come in a balloon convinced him that Dian the Beautiful had been here. He did not know who Pu might be, but he saw that they were divided among themselves as to his identity; and he also saw that no weapon was drawn against him.

"I have come down out of the sky," he said, "to visit your chief. Take me to him."

To many of the men of Tanga-tanga this sounded as though Pu spoke; and many who had said that it was not Pu wavered in their convictions.

"Go to the house of Furp," the go-sha," said one who was evidently an officer to a warrior, "and tell him that we are bringing a stranger to the temple to visit him and our Noada. If he is indeed Pu, our Noada will recognize him."

The gas bag, partially deflated, still billowed limply above the basket; and when David Innes stepped out and relieved it of his weight the balloon rose slowly and majestically into the air and floated away inland across the city of Tanga-tanga.

When David stood among them, those who thought that he was Pu, the god, fell upon their knees and covered their eyes with their hands. David looked at them in astonishment for a moment and then he quite suddenly realized that they must believe him a deity coming down from heaven; and that the name of this deity was Pu; and he thought to himself, what would a god do under like circumstances? He hazarded a guess, and he guessed right.

"Arise," he said. "Now escort me to the temple," for he recalled that the officer had said that that was where they were taking him. The officer's reference to "our Noada" and to "Furp, the go-sha," meant little or nothing to him; but he decided to maintain a godly silence on the subject until he did know.

They led him through the city gate and along narrow, crooked streets flanked by mean little houses of clay. Here he saw women and childen, the women wearing painted leather aprons like the men and having headdresses of feathers, while the children were naked. He noted with some measure of astonishment the bronze weapons and ornaments, and realized that these people had advanced into the age of bronze. Their walled city, their painted aprons, craftsmanship displayed in their weapons and ornaments, suggested that if the inner world were closely following the stages of human development upon the outer crust, these people might soon be entering the iron age.

To David Innes, if his mind had not been solely devoted to the finding of his mate, these people might have presented an interesting study in anthropology; but he thought of them now only as a means to an end. They had seen Dian's balloon. Had they seen her? Did they know what had become of her?

IN THE center of the city was an open plaza, on one side of which was a large, domed building, a replica of the temple where Dian the Beautiful had ruled for a short time in the city of Lolo-lolo. To this building David Innes was conducted.

Within it were many people. Some of them fell upon their knees and covered their eyes as he entered. These were the ones who were not taking any chances; but the majority stood and waited. Upon a dais at the far end of the room sat a girl in a long leather robe, georgeously painted in many col-

ors with strange designs. Upon her head was a massive feather headdress. Upon her arms were many bronze bracelets and armlets, and around her neck were strands of ivory beads.

As David Innes came toward the throne O-aa recognized him. They had brought her word that one who might be Pu had come to visit Furp the Go-sha; and now, nimble-witted as ever, she realized that she must perpetuate this erroneous belief as the most certain way in which to insure David's safety.

She rose and looked angrily upon those who had remained standing.

"Kneel!" she commanded imperiously. "Who dares stand in the presence of Pu."

David Innes was close enough now to recognize her; and as she saw recognition in his eyes, she forestalled anything he might be about to say: "The Noada welcomes you, Pu, to your temple in the city of Tanga-tanga"; and she held out her hands to him and indicated that he was to step to the dais beside her. When he had done so, she whispered, "Tell them to rise."

"Arise!" said David Innes in a commanding voice. It was a sudden transition from mortality to godhood, but David rose to the occasion, following the lead of little O-aa, daughter of OOse, king of Kali.

"What are your wishes, Pu?" asked O-aa. "Would you like to speak with your Noada alone?"

"I wish to speak with my Noada alone," said David Innes with great and godly dignity; "and then I will speak with Furp the Go-sha," he added.

O-aa turned to Ope the high priest. "Clear the temple," she said, "but tell the people to be prepared to return later with offerings for Pu. Then they shall know why Pu has come and whether he is pleased with the people of Tanga-tanga, or angry at them. And, Ope, have the lesser priests fetch a lesser bench for me, as Pu will sit upon my throne while he is here."

After the temple was cleared and the bench was brought and they were alone O-aa looked into David's eyes and grinned.

"Tell me what you are doing here, and how you got here," she said.

"First tell me if you have heard anything of Dian the Beautiful," insisted David.

"No," replied O-aa, "what has happened to her? I supposed, of course, that she was in Sari."

"NO," replied David, "she is not in Sari. Abner Perry built a balloon and it got away, carrying Dian the Beautiful with it."

"What is a balloon?" asked O-aa; and then she said, "Oh, is it a great, round ball with a basket fastened to it in which a person may ride through the air?"

"Yes," said David, "that is it."

"Then it was Dian who came before I did. They have told me about this thing that happened. The what-you-call-it, balloon, came down low over Tanga-tanga; and they thought that the woman in it was their Noada come from Karana; and they went out and fought with the men of Lolo-lolo for her. But the men of Lolo-lolo got her and she was Noada there until maybe thirty sleeps ago, maybe more. Then the people turned against her; and she disappeared with Gamba, the go-sha of Lolo-lolo, whom the people also wished to kill. What became of them no man knows; but the woman must have been Dian the Beautiful, for she came in that thing that floated through the air. But how did you get here, David Innes?"

"I also came in a balloon," replied

David. "I had Abner Perry build one, thinking that it might float in the same direction as had that which bore Dian away; for at this time of year the direction of the wind seldom varies, and a balloon is borne along by the wind."

"They told me that this visitor, who some of them thought might be Pu, had come down from Karana. Now I understand what they meant."

"What is Karana?" asked David.

"It is where Pu lives," explained O-aa. "It is where I live when I am not on earth. It is where those who worship Pu go when they die. It is a mighty good thing for me that Pu came from Karana when he did," she added.

"Why?" asked David. "What do you mean?"

"Ope, the high priest, and Furp, the go-sha, don't like me," replied O-aa. "They liked me at first, but now they don't like me any more. They don't like me at all. The people bring offerings to me, and many of these offerings are little pieces of metal, like the metal in my bracelets."

"It is bronze," said David Innes.

"Whatever it is, Ope the high priest and Furp the go-sha are very anxious to get hold of as much of it as they can; but I throw much of it back to the people because it is a lot of fun watching them fight for it; and that is why Ope and Furp do not like me. But it has made me very popular with the people of Tanga-tanga; and so, not only do Ope and Furp dislike me, but they fear me, also. I cannot understand why Ope and Furp and the people are so anxious to have these silly little pieces of metal."

DAVID INNES smiled. He was thinking of how typical it was of woman that even this little cave girl had no sense of the value of money, before she even knew what money was, or what it was for. "You had better let Ope and Furp have their silly little pieces of metal," he said. "I think you will live longer if you do; for these little pieces of metal men will commit murder."

"It is all very strange," said O-aa. "I do not understand it, but I do not dare ask questions because a Noada is supposed to know everything."

"And I suppose that Pu is supposed to know more than a Noada," remarked David, with a wry smile.

"Of course," said O-aa. "As I know everything that there is to be known, you must know everything that there is to be known, and a great deal that there isn't to be known."

"There is one thing that I don't know, but that I would like to know very much," he said; "and that is where Dian is, and whether she is still alive. After that I would like to know how we are going to get out of here and get back to Sari. You would like to get back, wouldn't you, O-aa?"

"It makes no difference to me now," she said, sadly. "Since Hodon the Fleet One was killed by Blug I do not care where I am."

"But Hodon was not killed by Blug," said David. "It was Blug who was killed."

"And I ran away thinking that Hodon was dead and that I would have to mate with Blug," exclaimed O-aa. "Oh, why didn't I wait and see! Tell me, where is Hodon?"

"Before I left Sari he asked for a ship and some men that he might go out upon the Lural Az and search for you; for he received the message that you sent to him in the event that he was not dead."

"And he will never find me," said O-aa, "and he will be lost on that terrible ocean."

After a while the people came back

and brought offerings for Pu. David Innes saw the little pieces of metal and he smiled—crude little coins, crudely minted. For these the high priest and the king would drag the goddess from her pedestal; and doubtless kill her into the bargain. Unquestionably, these men of the bronze age were advancing toward a higher civilization.

O-aa took a handful of the coins and threw them to the people, who scrambled, screaming, upon the floor of the temple, fighting for them. Ope the high priest and Furp the go-sha looked on with sullen scowls, but O-aa felt safer now because she had Pu right there at her side.

After the people had left the temple Ope and Furp remained; and Ope, suddenly emboldened by his anger at the loss of so many pieces of metal, said to David, "How is it that you are so much older than the Noada?"

O-aa was momentarily horrified, for she recalled that she had once told Ope and Furp that she was the mother of Pu. She had also told them that Pu did everything she told him to do. To be a successful liar one must be quick to cover up; so, before David could answer, O-aa answered for him.

"You should know, Ope, being my high priest, that a Noada may look any age she wishes. It pleases me not to look older than my son."

DAVID INNES was astounded by the effrontery of the girl. Metaphorically, he took his hat off to her. These people, he thought, would look far before they could find a better goddess than O-aa.

Ope the high priest, tried another tack. "Will Pu, who knows all, be kind enough to tell our Noada that she should not throw away the pieces of bronze that the people bring here as offerings?"

David thought that since he was supposed to know all, it would be best to pretend that he did.

"The Noada was quite right," said David. "She has done this to teach you not to exact so much from the people. I have known for a long time that your priests were demanding more from them than they could afford to give; and that is one reason why I came from Karana to talk with you; and with Furp, who also exacts more in taxes than he should."

Ope and Furp looked most unhappy, but Furp spoke up and said, "I must pay my warriors and keep the city in repair; and Ope must pay the priests and keep up the temple."

"You are telling Pu the things that he already knows," said David. "Hereafter you will exact less taxes and fewer offerings; demanding only what you require for the proper maintenance of the city and the temple."

Ope was a simple fellow, who believed against his will that this was indeed Pu the god; and he was afraid; but Furp was a skeptic, as well as something of an atheist; at least, he bordered on atheism. But, with Ope, he bowed to the will of Pu; at least temporarily, and with mental reservations.

"There are many things that trouble my mind," said Ope to David. "Perhaps you will explain them to me. We have always been taught that there was Pu; and that he had one daughter, who was our Noada. But now I am not only told that Pu is the son of our Noada, but that she had three fathers, eleven brothers, and four sisters, all of the latter being Noadas."

Even O-aa flushed at the recital of this bare-faced lie which she had told Ope in order to impress him with her knowledge of conditions in Karana. For a moment she was lost, and could think of nothing to say. She only wondered

what reply David Innes would make.

"It is all very simple," he said, "when you understand it. As my high priest, Ope, you must know that Pu is all-powerful."

Ope nodded. "Yes, of course, I know that," he said importantly.

"Then you will understand why it is that Pu can be either the son or the father of your Noada. We can change about as we wish; and the Noada can have as many brothers, or as many sisters, or as many fathers, as I wish her to have. Is that clear to you?"

"Perfectly clear," said Ope. But it was not clear to Furp; and when he left the temple he started to implant in the minds of many a suspicion that the man who had come down out of the skies was not Pu at all, nor was the woman a true Noada. Furp planted the seed and was willing to wait and let it germinate, as he knew it would.

IT HAPPENED that when Hodon the Fleet One reached the coast of Amoz, to set sail upon the Lural Az in search of O-aa, that Raj, the Mezop who had commanded the Sari, was there; and Hodon asked Raj to come with him and take command of the little ship in which he and his warriors were about to embark.

The Mezops were a seafaring people, and Hodon was fortunate in obtaining the services of one to command his ship; and it was also additionally fortunate that it was Raj, because Raj knew exactly where the Sari had been abandoned; and he also knew the winds and the ocean currents. Knowing these, and where they would ordinarily have carried the Sari, Raj set his course for the mouth of the nameless strait. After many sleeps they reached it; but they had to stand off for several more sleeps because of a terrific storm, which because of the seamanship of Raj, they weathered.

When the storm abated the wind and the currents swept the little ship into the mouth of the nameless strait, swept it close past the coast of the Xexot country, and the spot where the wreck of the Sari had lain until the storm they had just weathered had broken her up and removed all vestiges of the clue to the whereabouts of O-aa that it had previously constituted, and which would have led them immediately to the city of Tanga-tanga.

David Innes and O-aa sat upon the dias in the temple of Pu, ignorant of the fact that their friends were passing so near them.

DIAN the Beautiful and Gamba, paddling through the nameless strait toward the Korsar Az, did not see the great balloon that passed in the air high behind them. Only a few thousand yards separated Dian the Beautiful and David at that moment; and it was a cruel fate that had prevented them from knowing how close they had been to a reunion; for David could have brought the balloon down on the shore, and Dian could have returned to it.

Dian had seen to it that the canoe was stocked with food and water before they embarked upon their perilous journey. They took turns sleeping as they let the current carry them along. Time and again they were attacked by fearful creatures of the deep, for this strange thing upon the surface of the water attracted many to them. Some were motivated only by curiosity, but voracious appetites actuated the majority of them; and it was a constant source of surprise to Gamba that they emerged from each encounter victorious.

"I didn't think that we would live to sleep once after we set out from

shore," he said.

"I was not so sure myself," replied Dian, "but now I think that we shall get through to the Korsar Az, and then go up the coast to a point opposite Amoz. We can cut across country there; but I believe that greater dangers lie ahead of us on land than on the sea."

"Is it a savage country?" asked Gamba.

"For a long way back from the shores of the Korsar Az it is a very savage country," replied Dian. "I have never been there, but our men who have ventured into it to hunt say that it is infested with savage beasts, and even more savage men."

"I wish," said Gamba, "that I had never seen you. If you had not come to Lolo-lolo, I should still be go-sha and safe behind the walls of my city."

"I wish you would stop harping on that," said Dian, "but I may say that if you had been a better go-sha you would still have been there; and if you want to go back, we can paddle to shore, and I will let you out."

After many sleeps they reached the end of the nameless strait, which narrowed right at the entrance to the Korsar Az; so that the waters rushed through with terrific velocity, and the little canoe was almost swamped many times before it floated out on the comparatively smooth surface of the Korsar Az. Now they turned in a northeasterly direction, hugging the coast; and it was then that the storm that had held Hodon off the mouth of the nameless strait in the Sojar Az, struck them and carried them far from shore.

Driving rain blinded them, and great seas constantly threatened to swamp them; so that while one paddled in an effort to keep the canoe from turning broadside into the trough of the sea, the other bailed with one of the gourds that Dian had thoughtfully brought along for that purpose.

They were both exhausted when a shoreline suddenly rose before them, dimly visible through the rain. Now Dian could see a wide, white beach up which enormous rollers raced, to break thunderously upon the shore; and toward this the storm was carrying them, nor could any puny efforts which they might put forth avert the inevitable end.

It did not seem possible to the girl that they could live in that terrific surf; but she determined to try to ride it in, and so she told Gamba to paddle with all his strength; and she did likewise.

ON AND on the little canoe raced; and then, riding just below the crest of an enormous roller, it shot with terrific speed towards the shore; and, like a surfboard, it was carried far up on the beach.

Surprised that they still lived, they leaped out and held it as the water receded; then they dragged it farther up on the shore, out of reach of the breakers.

"I think," said Gamba, "that you must really be a Noada; for no mortal being could come through what we have come through, and live."

Dian smiled. "I have never said that I wasn't," she replied.

Gamba thought this over, but he made no comment. Instead, he said presently, "As soon as the storm is over we can start for Amoz. It is good to be on land again and to know that we shall not have to face the dangers of the sea any more."

"We have a lot more sea to cross," said Dian, "before we reach Amoz."

"What do you mean?" demanded Gamba. "Have we not been driven ashore; are we not on land?"

"Yes, we are on land," replied Dian,

"but that storm blew us away from that land where Amoz lies; and as it certainly did not blow us all the way across the enormous Korsar Az, it must have blown us onto an island."

Gamba appeared stunned. "Now there is no hope for us," he said. "This is indeed the end. You are no true Noada, or you would not have permitted this to happen."

Dian laughed. "You give up too easily," she said. "You must have been a very poor go-sha indeed."

"I was a good go-sha until you came along," snapped Gamba; "but now, great Noada," he said sarcastically, "what do we do next?"

"As soon as the storm dies down," replied Dian, "we launch the canoe and set out for shore."

"I do not want to go on the water again," said Gamba.

"Very well, then," replied Dian, "you may remain here; but I am going."

Beyond the beach rose cliffs to the height of a hundred feet or more. Topping them Dian could see green, jungle-like verdure; and not far away a waterfall leaped over the cliff into the sea, which lashed the face of the cliff itself at this point, throwing spray so high into the air that at these times the waterfall was hidden. In the other direction the sea again broke against the face of the cliff. They stood upon a narrow, crescent-shaped bit of land that the sea had never as yet claimed. To Gamba, as to you and me, the cliffs looked unscalable; but to Dian the cave girl they appeared merely difficult. However, as she had no intention of scaling them, it made no difference.

They were very uncomfortable for a long while, as they sat drenched by the heavy downpour. There was no cave into which they could crawl, and sleep was out of the question. They just sat and endured; Dian stoically, Gamba grumblingly.

At last, however, they saw the sun shining far out upon the sea, and they knew that the storm was passing over them and that it would soon be gone. Often it is a relief to have that eternal noonday sun hidden by a cloud; but now when the cloud passed they were glad of the sun's warmth again.

"Let us sleep," said Dian, "and if the sea has gone down when we awaken I shall set out again in search of the big land. I think you would be wise if you came with me, but do as you please. It makes no difference to me."

"You have a heart of stone," said the man. "How can you talk like that to a man who loves you?"

"I am going to sleep now," said Dian, "and you had better do likewise;" and she curled up in the wet grass with the hot sun beating down upon her beautiful body.

DIAN dreamed that she was back in Sari, and that her people were gathered around her; and that David was there and she was very happy, happier than she had been for a long time.

Presently one of the people standing around her kicked her lightly in the ribs, and Dian awakened. She opened her eyes to see that there really were people surrounding her, but they were not the people of Sari. They were big men, who carried long, heavy spears and great bows; and their loincloths were made of the skins of tarags, and the heads of tarags had been cleverly fashioned to form helmets that covered their heads, with the great tucks pointing downward on either side of their heads at an angle of forty-five degrees, and the quivers which held their arrows at their backs were of the skin of the great carnivores—of the black and yellow hide of the tarag, the huge,

sabre-tooth tiger that has been so long extinct upon the outer crust.

"Get up," said one of the men; and then he kicked Gamba.

Gamba sat up and looked around in bewilderment. "Where did these come from?" he demanded of Dian.

"Get up," said the man; and Dian and Gamba both came to their feet.

"What do you want of us?" demanded Dian. "We were leaving as soon as the sea went down."

"What were you doing here?" asked the man.

"The storm drove us onto this shore," replied Dian. "We were trying to reach the mainland."

"Who are you?"

"I am Dian, the mate of David Innes, the Emperor of Pellucidar."

"We never heard of you, or him, and I do not know what an emperor is."

"He is what you might call the Chief of chiefs," explained Dian. "He has an army and a navy and many guns. He would be your friend if you would protect me and this man."

"What is a Navy? What are guns?" demanded this man. "And why should we be kind to you? We are not afraid of this David Innes; we are not afraid of anyone in Pellucidar. We are the men of Tandar."

"What is Tandar?" demanded Dian.

"You mean to say you have never heard of Tandar?" exclaimed the warrior.

"Never," said Dian.

"Neither have I," said Gamba.

The warrior looked at them disgustedly. "This is the Island of Tandar that you are on," he said; "and I am Hamlar, the Chief."

"The sea is going down," said Dian, "and we shall soon be leaving."

Hamlar laughed; it was a nasty sort of a laugh. "You will never leave Tandar," he said; "no one who comes here ever does."

Dian shrugged. She knew her world, and she knew that the man meant what he said.

"Come," said Hamlar; and there was nothing to do but follow him.

WARRIORS surrounded them as Hamlar led the way toward the water-fall. Dian was barefooted, as she had left her sandals on the thwart of the canoe to dry. She would not ask Hamlar if she might get them, for she was too proud to ask favors of an enemy. She kept looking up at the face of the cliff to see where these men had come down, but she saw no sign of a place here that even she could scale; and then Hamlar reached the waterfall and disappeared beneath it, and a moment later Dian found herself on a narrow ledge that ran beneath the falls; and then she followed the warrior ahead of her into the mouth of a cavern that was as dark as pitch and damp with dripping water.

She climbed through the darkness, feeling her way, until presently she saw a little light ahead. The light came from above down a shaft that inclined slightly from the vertical, and leaning against its wall was a crude ladder. Dian had delayed those behind her in the darkness of the cavern, but now she clambered up the ladder like a monkey, soon overtaking those ahead of her. She could hear the warriors behind her growling at Gamba for climbing so slowly; and she could hear his grunts and cries as they prodded him with their spears.

From the top of the shaft a winding trail led through the jungle. Occasionally Dian caught glimpses of large animals slinking along other paths that paralleled or crossed the one they were on; and she saw the yellow and black of the tarag's hide.

A mile inland from the coast they came to a clearing at the foot of a towering cliff, in the sandstone face of which caves and ledges had been laboriously excavated and cut. She looked with amazement upon these cliff dwellings, which must have required many generations to construct. At the foot of the cliff warriors lolled in the shade of trees, while women worked and children played.

At least a score of great tarags slept, or wandered about among the people. She saw a child pull the tail of one, and the great carnivore turned upon it with an ugly snarl. The child jumped back, and the tarag continued its prowling. Aside from that one child, no one seemed to pay any attention to the brutes at all.

Attracted by the sight of Dian and Gamba, warriors, women and children clustered about; and it was evident from their remarks that they seldom saw strangers upon their island. The women wore loin-cloths and sandals of the skins of tarags. Like the men, the women were rather handsome, with well-shaped heads, and intelligent eyes.

Hamlar motioned to one of the women. "Manai," he said, "this one is yours," and he pointed at Dian. "Does anyone want the man?" he asked, looking around. "If not, we will kill him and feed him to the tarags."

Gamba looked around then, too, hopefully; but at first no one indicated any desire to possess him. Finally, however, a woman spoke up and said, "I will take him. He can fetch wood and water for me and beat the skins of the tarags to soften them;" and Gamba breathed a sigh of relief.

"Come," said Manai to Dian, and led the way up a series of ladders to a cave far up in the face of the cliff.

"This," she said, stopping upon a ledge before an opening, "is the cave of Hamlar, the chief, who is my mate." Then she went in and came back with a bundle of twigs tied tightly together with strips of rawhide. "Clean out the cave of Hamlar and Manai," she said, "and see that none of the dirt falls over the edge of the cliff. You will find a big gourd in the cave. Put the dirt into it and carry it down to the foot of the cliff and dump it in the stream."

SO DIAN the Beautiful, Empress of Pelucidar, went to work as a slave for Manai, the mate of Hamlar, chief of Tandar; and she thought that she was fortunate not to have been killed. After she had cleaned the cave and carried the dirt down and dumped it in the stream, Manai, who had returned to the women at the foot of the cliff, called to her. "What is your name?" she asked.

"Dian," replied the girl.

"There is meat in the cave," said Manai. "Go and get it and bring it down here and make a fire and cook it for Hamlar and Manai, and for Bovar, their son."

While Dian was broiling the meat she saw Gamba pounding a tarag skin with two big sticks; and she smiled when she thought that not many sleeps ago he had been a king, with slaves to wait upon him.

Hamlar came and sat down beside Manai. "Does your slave work, or is she lazy?" he asked.

"She works," said Manai.

"She had better," said Hamlar, "for if she doesn't work, we will have to kill her and feed her to the tarags. We cannot afford to feed a lazy slave. Were is Bovar?" he asked.

"He is asleep in his cave," replied Manai. "He told me to awaken him when we ate."

"Send the slave for him," said Hamlar. "The meat is almost ready."

"Bovar's cave is next to ours, just to the right of it," Manai told Dian. "Go there and awaken him."

So again Dian the Beautiful clambered up the long series of ladders to the ledge far up on the face of the cliff; and she went to the opening next to that of Hamlar's cave and called Bovar by name. She called several times before a sleepy voice answered.

"What do you want?" it demanded.

"Manai, your mother, has sent me to tell you that the meat is ready and that they are about to eat."

A tall young warrior crawled out of the cave and stood erect. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"I am Manai's new slave," replied Dian.

"What is your name?" asked Bovar.

"Dian," replied the girl.

"That is a pretty name," he said; "and you are a pretty girl. I think you are the prettiest girl I ever saw. Where do you come from?"

"I come from Amoz, which lies beside the Darel Az," replied Dian.

"I never heard of either one of them," said Bovar; "but no matter where you come from, you are certainly the prettiest girl I ever saw," repeated Bovar.

"Come down to your meat," said Dian as she turned to the ladder and started to descend.

BOVAR followed her, and they joined Hamlar and Manai beside the leg of meat that was roasting over the fire on a pointed stick that Dian had driven through it, which was supported by forked sticks at either end.

"The meat is cooked," said Manai, who had been turning it during Dian's absence. Dian took it from the fire then and laid it upon some leaves that were spread upon the ground, and Hamlar took his knife of stone and cut off a large piece and held it on a pointed stick to cool a little; and then Manai cut off a piece, and then Bovar.

"May I eat?" asked Dian.

"Eat," said Hamlar.

Dian drew her bronze knife from its sheath and cut off a piece of the meat. The knife cut slickly and smoothly, not like the crude stone weapons of the Tandars.

"Let me see that," said Bovar; and Dian handed him the knife.

"No one ever saw anything like this," said Bovar; and handed it to his father. Both Hamlar and Manai examined it closely.

"What is it?" demanded Hamlar.

"It is a knife," said Dian.

"I don't mean that," said Hamlar. "I mean, what is it made of?"

"It is a metal which the Xexots call 'androde,' " replied the girl.

Bovar held out his hand for the knife and Manai gave it to him.

"Who are the Xexots?" said Hamlar.

"They are people who live a long way from here at the other end of the nameless strait."

"Do these people all have knives made of this metal?" asked Hamlar.

"Knives, and swords, too." She did not tell him that her sword and Gamba's were in the canoe; for she hoped some day to be able to run away and put to sea again.

Dian held her hand out towards Bovar for the knife. "I shall keep it," he said. "I like it."

"Give it back to her," said Manai. "It is hers. We are not thieves." So Bovar handed the knife back to Dian; but he made up his mind then and there to possess it, and he knew just how to go about it. All that he would have to do would be to push Dian off the ledge that ran in front of his cave; and he was sure that Manai would let him have the knife; provided, of course,

that no one saw him push Dian.

MANY sleeps had passed since Pu came to Tanga-tanga, but neither David Innes nor O-aa had been able to concoct any scheme whereby they might escape. The temple guard was composed entirely of warriors hand-picked by Furp; and as far as David Innes and O-aa were concerned, these guardsmen were their jailers.

Furp was convinced that they were just ordinary mortals who had come to Tanga-tanga by accident; but he knew that most of the people believed in them, and so he did not dare to act against them too openly. He would gladly have had them killed; for now he was not receiving from Ope, the high priest, even a quarter as many pieces of bronze as he had before the advent of the Noada.

It was a little better since Pu had come, but the avaricious Furp wanted much more. Ope, the high priest, was secretly their enemy, and for the same reason that Furp was; but being a simple and superstitious fool, he had convinced himself that it was really a true god and goddess who sat upon the dais of the temple.

Though their enemies were powerful, those who believed in Pu and the Noada were many; and they were loved by these because the amount of their taxes and offerings had been greatly reduced, and now they had pieces of bronze with which to buy more food, and such other things as they required.

Both David and O-aa felt the undercurrent of intrigue against them, and they also felt that many of the common people were their friends; but these were never allowed to speak with them alone, as they were always surrounded by the priests of the temple, or the temple guards.

"I wish I might talk with some of these people alone," said David upon one of the few occasions where he had an opportunity to speak even to O-aa without being overheard by a priest or a warrior. "I think they are our friends, and if anyone were plotting against us, they would tell us if they had the opportunity."

"I am sure of it," said O-aa. "They have always liked me; and now they like you, too; for between us we have saved them a great many pieces of metal."

Suddenly David snapped his fingers. "I have it!" he exclaimed. "In the world from which I come there is a great and old religious faith whose communicants may come and confess their sins and be forgiven. They come alone and whisper to the priest, telling him what is troubling their hearts; and no one but the priest may hear them. Pu is going to ordain that the people of Tanga-tanga have this privilege, with one great advantage over confessers in that other world, in that they may confess their sins directly to the ear of their god."

"Ope won't let you do it," said O-aa.

"There is a good, old American expression, which you would not understand, that explains succinctly just how I purpose winning Ope over."

"What are you going to do, then?" inquired O-aa.

"I am going to scare the pants off of him," said David.

"What are pants?" asked O-aa.

"That is neither here nor there," replied David.

"Here comes Ope now," said O-aa. "I shall watch while you scare his pants off."

OPE, THE high priest, came sinuously towards them; his gait reminding David of the silent approach of a snake.

David glared at the high priest sternly. "Ope," he said in a terrible voice, "I know what you have been thinking."

"I-I-I-I don't know what you mean," stammered the high priest.

"Oh, yes you do," said David. "Don't you know that you could be struck dead for thinking such thoughts?"

"No, most gracious Pu; honestly, I have not thought a bad thought about you. I have not thought of harming you—" and then he stopped suddenly; realizing, perhaps, that he had given himself away.

"I even know what you are thinking this instant," cried David; and Ope's knees smote together. "See that there is no more of it," continued David; "and be sure that you obey my slightest wish, or that of your Noada."

Ope dropped to his knees and covered his eyes with his palms. "Most glorious Pu," he said, "you shall never have reason to upbraid me again."

"And you'd better tell Furp to be careful what he thinks," said O-aa.

"I shall tell him," said Ope, "but Furp is a wicked man, and he may not believe me."

"In spite of the wickedness of Tanga-tanga, I am going to bring a great blessing to its people," said David. "Have built for me immediately against the wall beside the dais a room two paces square, with a door, and place two benches within it. The room should be two and a half paces high, and have no ceiling."

"It shall be done at once, most glorious Pu," said Ope, the high priest.

"See that it is," said David, "and when it is done summon the people to the temple; for I would speak to them and explain this wonderful blessing that I am bringing them."

Ope, the high priest, was dying to know what the blessing was, but he did not dare ask; and he was still worrying and cudgeling his brain as he went away to arrange to have artisans build a clay room such as David had demanded.

I am sure that he is really Pu, thought Ope, the high priest. I am thinking good thoughts of him and of our Noada; and I always must. I must keep thinking good thoughts of them, good thoughts; and I must not let Furp put any bad thoughts into my head. He thought this last thought in the hope that Pu was listening to it and would place all the blame upon Furp for the bad thoughts which Ope knew only too well he had been entertaining.

When the little room beside the dais was completed David directed that the people be summoned to the temple; and the lesser priests went out in their hideous masks and beat upon drums and summoned the people to come to the temple of Pu; and the temple was so crowded with people that no more could get in, and those who could not get into the temple filled the plaza.

IT was O-aa who addressed them: "Pu has decided to confer upon the people of Tanga-tanga a great blessing," she said. "Many of you have sinned; and if you have sinned much and have not been forgiven by Pu, it will be difficult for you to get into Karana after you die. Therefore, Pu has had constructed this little room here, where you may go, one at a time, and sit with Pu and confess your sins, that Pu may grant you forgiveness. You cannot all come at once, but between sleeps Pu will listen to the sins of twenty. Go forth into the plaza now and explain this to the others who are there; and then let twenty return to the temple to confess."

The people rushed out into the plaza then, and explained this marvelous thing to those who had not heard O-aa's words; and there was almost a riot be-

fore twenty had been selected to lay their sins before Pu prior to the next sleep.

David went into the little room, and the first of those who were to confess came and kneeled before him, covering his eyes with his hands. David told him to arise and sit on the other bench; and then he said, "You may now confess your sins, and be forgiven."

"Many sleeps ago," said the man," "before you and our Noada came, I stole pieces of metal from a neighbor who had money; because the priests and the go-sha had taken so many of mine from me that I did not have any to buy food for my family."

"When you are able to do so, you may return the pieces to the man from whom you took them," said David, "and you shall be forgiven. Did you know," continued David, "that if you have heard words spoken against Pu or the Noada, and have not come and told them, that that is a sin?"

"I did not know that," said the man, "but I have heard words spoken against you and the Noada. The warriors of Furp go among the people, telling them that you and the Noada are not from Karana; but that you are from Molop Az, and that some day soon you will destroy Tanga-tanga and take all its people to the Molop Az for the Little Men to devour. I did not believe that, and there are a good many others who do not believe it, but there are some who do; and these warriors are trying to incite them to murder you and the Noada."

"What is your name?" asked David; and when the man had told him David scratched the name with the point of his dagger in the clay of the wall of the little room. The man watched this process almost fearfully, for he knew nothing of the alphabets, or of writing. "This," said David, "is the sign of your forgiveness. It will stand as long as the temple stands, and Pu and the Noada remain here in safety. Now, go on about your business, whatever it may be, and as you work learn the names of as many as possible who are loyal to Pu and the Noada; so that if we are ever in trouble you may summon them to the temple to defend us."

The man left the temple, and it did not occur to him that it was strange that a god and a Noada who were all-powerful should require the help of mortals to defend them.

After many sleeps David had spoken with many of the citizens; and he had scratched upon the walls of the little room the names of those that he thought could be depended upon to be loyal to him and to O-aa. Nor was Furp idle during this time, for he had determined to rid himself of these two who were constantly increasing their hold upon the people; and depriving him of the pieces of bronze which he had been accustomed to collect from the temple and from the people.

Both Furp and Ope were quite concerned about this new confessional which permitted Pu to speak secretly with the people; but they would have been more concerned had they known that Pu, who now controlled the finances of the temple, was giving pieces of bronze to those who were loyal to him, in the privacy of the confessional, with which to purchase swords, and bows and arrows.

AH-GILAK, the little old man from Cape Cod, was much concerned over the fate of David Innes, whom he greatly admired, not only because of his ability and courage, but because David was from Hartford, Connecticut; and he felt that in this outlandish world at the center of the earth New Englanders were bound together by a

common tie.

"Dod-burn it," he said to Abner Perry, shortly after David had departed, "how is the ding-busted idiot goin' to get back if that contraption carries him across the nameless strait that everyone says is at the end of the world?"

"I don't know," said Abner Perry sadly; "and to think that it is all my fault, all my fault. Because I am a careless, absentminded old fool, I have sent the two I loved best to death."

"Well, settin' around cryin' over spilt milk ain't goin' to butter no parsnips, as the feller said, rejoined Ah-gilak. "What we ought to do is do sumpn about it."

"What can we do?" asked Abner Perry. "There is nothing that I would not do. I have been seriously considering building another balloon with which to follow them.

"Humph!" ejaculated Ah-gilak. "You sure are the dod-burndest old fool I've ever hearn tell of. What good could you do if you did float over the nameless strait in one of them contraptions? We'd only have three of you to look for, instead of two. But I got a idea that I've been thinking about ever since David left."

"What is it?" asked Perry.

"Well, you see," explained the little old man, "afore the Dolly Dorcas was wrecked in the Arctic Ocean in 1845 I'd been a-plannin' that when I got back to Cape Cod I'd build me a clipper ship, the finest, fastest clipper ship that ever cut salt water. But then, of course the Dolly Dorcas she did get wrecked, and I drifted down here into this dod-burned hole in the ground; and I ain't never had no chance to build no clipper ship; but now, if I had the men and the tools, I could build one; and we could go down and cross this here nameless strait, and maybe we could find David and this here Dian the Beautiful."

Abner Perry brightened immediately at the suggestion. "Do you think you could do it, Ah-gilak?" he asked. "For if you can, I can furnish you the men and the tools. We haven't got a ship left seaworthy enough to navigate the nameless strait in safety; and if you can build one and sail it, I can furnish the men to build it, and the men to man it."

"Let's start, then," said Ah-gilak. "Procrastination is the mother of invention, as the feller said."

WITH this hope held out to him, Abner Perry was a new man. He sent for Ghak the Hairy One, who was king of Sari; and who theoretically ruled the loose federation of the Empire of Pelucidar while David was absent. Perry explained to Khak what Ah-gilak had proposed, and Ghak was as enthusiastic as either of them. Thus it was that the entire tribe of Sarians, men, women and children, trekked to Amoz, which is on the Darel Az, a shallow sea that is really only a bay on the coast of the Lural Az.

They took with them arms and ammunition and tools—axes and hammers and chisels and mattocks, all the tools that Perry had taught them to make, after he himself had achieved steel following his discovery and smelting of iron ore, and the happy presence of carbon in the foothills near Sari.

Ghak sent runners to Thoria, Suvi, and Kali; and eventually a thousand men were gathered at Amoz, felling trees and shaping the timbers; and hunters went forth and killed dinosaurs for the peritonea which was to form the sails.

Ah-gilak did not design the huge clipper ship he had planned to build at Cape Cod, but a smaller one that might

be equally fast, and just as seaworthy.

Ja, the Mezop, came from the Anoroc Islands with a hundred men who were to help with the building of the ship and man it after it was launched; for the Mezops are the seafaring men of the Empire of Pelucidar.

The women fabricated the shrouds and the rigging from the fibres of an abacálike plant; and even the children worked, fetching and carrying.

No man may know how long it took to build that clipper ship, in a world where it is always noon and there are no moving celestial bodies to mark the passage of time; a fact which always annoyed Ah-gilak.

"Dod-burn that dod-blasted sun!" he exclaimed. "Why don't it rise and set like a sun oughta? How's a feller goin' to know when to quit work? Gad and Gabriel! It ain't decent."

But the Pelucidarians knew when to quit work. When they were hungry they stopped and ate; when they were sleepy they crawled into the darkest place they could find and went to sleep. Then the little old man from Cape Cod would dance around in a frenzy of rage and profanity, if their sleeping or their eating interfered with the building of the clipper. However, the work progressed, and eventually the clipper was ready to launch. The ways were greased, and every preparation had been made. A hundred men stood by the blocks, ready to pull them away.

"Dod-burn it!!" exclaimed Ah-gilak. "We got to christen 'er, and we plumb forgot to find a name for her."

"You designed her and you built her," said Abner Perry; "and so I think that you are the one who should have the privilege of naming her."

"That's fair enough," said Ah-gilak, "and I'm going to call her the John Tyler, because I voted for him for president at the last election; that is, I voted for him and William Henry Harrison; but when Harrison died Tyler became president."

"Why, that was ninety-nine years ago, man!" exclaimed Abner Perry.

"I don't give a dod-blasted whoop if it was a hundred and ninety-nine years ago," said Ah-gilak. "I voted for Harrison and Tyler at the last election."

"DO you know what year it is now?" asked Abner Perry.

"David Innes tried to tell me that I was a hundred and thirty-five years old," Said Ah-gilak; "but he has lived down here in this dod-burned hole in the ground so long he's crazy. They don't none of you know what year this is. They ain't no years here; they ain't no months! they ain't no weeks; they ain't no days, they ain't nothin' but noon. How you going to count time when it's always noon? Anyhow I'm going to name her the John Tyler."

"I think that's an excellent name," said Abner Perry.

"Now we ought to have a bottle of something to bust on her bow while I christen her," said Ah-gilak. "If a thing's worth doin' at all, don't put it off till tomorrow, as the feller said."

The best substitute for a bottle of champagne which they could find was a clay jug filled with water. Ah-gilak held it in his hand and stood by the bow of the clipper. Suddenly he turned to Abner Perry. "This ain't right," he said. "Who ever heard of a man christening a ship?"

"Stellara, the mate of Tanar, the son of Ghak, is here," said Abner Perry. "Let her christen the John Tyler"; and so Stellara came, and Ah-gilak told her what to do; and at his signal the men pulled the blocks away immediately after Stellara had broken the jug of water on the bow of the clipper and said, "I christen thee the John Tyler."

With a hoarse scream, Dian's captor tumbled into the depths

The ship slipped down the ways into the Darel Az; and the people of Thoria and Sari and Amoz and Suvi and Kali, screamed with delight.

The cannon had been put aboard her before they launched her; and now they set about rigging her, and this work Ah-gilak insisted must be done by the Mezops, who were to be the sailors that manned the ship; so that they would know every rope and spar. It was all a tremendous undertaking for people of the stone age, for they had so much to learn; and when the ship was rigged the Mezops had to be drilled in making sail and taking it in quickly. Fortunately, they were not only seafaring men, but semi-arboreal, as they live in trees on their native islands. They ran up the shrouds like monkeys, and out upon the yardarms as though they had been born upon them.

"The may be red Injuns," said Ah-gilak to Perry, "but they're goin' to make fine sailormen."

Vast quantities of water in bamboo containers was stored aboard, as was salt meat, vegetables, nuts, and quantities of the rough flour that Abner Perry had taught the Pelucidarians to make.

At last the Mezops were well drilled, and the John Tyler prepared to sail. Ah-gilak was skipper, Ja was the first mate and navigator. The second and third mates were Jav and Ko, while Ghak the Hairy One commanded two hundred picked warriors; for, being cavemen, they anticipated having to do battle after they had landed in the terra incognita beyond the nameless strait.

They had neither compass, nor sextant, nor any chronometer; but they had a man from Thoria aboard who could point the general direction; and Ja knew the great ocean currents that flowed directly along their course.

With all sails set to a fair wind, the John Tyler tossed the white water from her bow as she sailed gallantly out into the Lural Az in her quest for David Innes and Dian the Beautiful; and, for the first time since Dian had floated away toward the Land of Awful Shadow, Abner Perry felt hope budding in his breast; and for the first time in ninety-five years the little old man from Cape Cod was really happy.

"I AM tired of being a slave," said Gamba to Dian, as they met beside the stream where Dian was filling a large gourd with water and Gamba was washing the loincloths of his mistress. "That woman nearly works me to death."

"It is better than being killed and fed to the tarags," said Dian.

"I am afraid of the tarags," said Gamba. "I don't see why they let the terrible things hang around the way they do."

"They are tame," said Dian. "Manai told me that they catch them when they are cubs and tame them for hunting and for battle. There is a tribe on the other side of the island, two or three long marches away, with which Hamlar's tribe is always at war. The name of this tribe is Manat; and as the Tandars have tamed and trained tarags, so the Manats have tamed and trained tahos."

"What a terrible place," grumbled Gamba. "Why did we have to be cast ashore here?"

"You do not know when you are well off," said Dian. "If you had stayed in Lolo-lolo, you would have been killed; and if that woman had not taken you to be her slave, you would have been fed to the tarags. Are you never satisfied? Bovar said that you were very lucky to find a master at all, because

nobody likes your yellow skin."

"And I do not like Bovar," snapped Gamba.

"Why?" asked Dian.

"Because he is in love with you."

"Nonsense!" said Dian.

"It is true," said Gamba. "He is always following you around with his eyes when he is not following you around with his feet."

"He does not want me," said Dian; "he wants my bronze knife;" she called the metal androde.

"In the name of Pu!" exclaimed Gamba. "Look what's coming!'

Dian turned to see three great tarags slinking toward them. She and Gamba were some little distance from the cliff, and the tarags were between the cliff and them. Gamba was terrified, but Dian was not. The great beasts came and rubbed against the girl and nuzzled her hands, while Gamba sat frozen with terror.

"They will not hurt us," said Dian. "They are my friends. Every time that I can, I bring them pieces of meat."

One of the beasts came and smelled of Gamba; and then it bared its terrible fangs and growled, and the man shook as with palsy. Dian came and pushed against the beast's shoulder to turn it away, at the same time scratching it around one of its ears; then she walked away with her gourd of water, and the three beasts followed her.

FOR a long time Gamba sat there, wholly unnerved and unable to resume his work. But presently a woman came and spoke to him. "Get to work," she said, "you lazy ja-lok. What do you suppose I am feeding you for, to sit around and do nothing? Much more of this and you will be tarag meat."

"I am sick," said Gamba.

"Well, you had better get well," said the woman, "for I won't feed any sick slave." So Gamba, who had been a king, resumed his washing; and when it was done, he wrung the water out of the loincloths and took them and stretched them on a flat rock, where he rubbed them and rubbed them with a smooth stone to squeeze every remaining drop of water from them and to keep them soft as they dried in the hot sun. While he was doing this, his mistress came by again.

"You have not cleaned the cave since my last sleep," she said iritably.

"I have been doing the washing," said Gamba. "When that is done, I intended to clean the cave."

"You could have done both twice over if you hadn't been loafing," said the woman. "I don't know what to do. It is almost impossible to get a decent slave lately. I have had to feed the last three to the tarags, and it looks as though you would go the same way."

"I will try to do better," said Gamba. "I will work very hard."

"See that you do," said the woman, whose name was Shrud.

Dian shared a cave with some other slaves on the very lowest level. Such, of course, in a cave village, may be the least desirable, as the lower level is close to the ground and more easily accessible to wild beasts and enemies. She could go into it and sleep when her work was done; but it always seemed that she had no more than closed her eyes before Manai, or Hamlar, or Bovar, called her.

It was Bovar who called her most often, and usually for no other reason than that he wished to talk with her. He had long since given up all thoughts of killing her in order to obtain her bronze dagger, for he had become infatuated with her; but according to the customs of his tribe, he could not take a slave as a mate. However, this fact did not wholly discourage Bovar,

for he knew of a cave hidden deep in the jungle; and he toyed with the thought of stealing Dian and taking her there.

Once, after a fitful sleep, Bovar awoke cross and irritable. As he came out on the ledge before his cave he saw Dian walking toward the jungle. Two great tarags paced beside her. Dian was having ideas. She was going to run away, find the beach where her canoe lay, and paddle out upon the Korsar Az in an effort to reach the mainland. She had asked Gamba to go with her, but he had said that they would only be caught and fed to the tarags; so she had decided to go alone.

AS Bovar reached the foot of the lowest ladder, one of the great tigers lay stretched in sleep across his path. He gave it a vicious kick in the ribs to make it get out of his way; and the beast sprang up with bared fangs, growling hideously. Bovar prodded it with his long, heavy spear; and it screamed and stepped back; then it slunk away, still growling. Paying no more attention to the tarag, Bovar looked around at the men and women of his tribe, who were down at the foot of the cliff. No one was paying any attention to him. The men were lying around in the shade of trees, half asleep; and the women were working. So Bovar walked nonchalantly towards the jungle into which Dian had disappeared. He did not look back; if he had, he would have seen a tarag slinking after him.

Gamba was scrubbing the floor of his mistress' cave. He had carried up a gourd of water and a smooth flat stone and a bundle of grasses. His knees were raw and bleeding from contact with the sandstone floor. As Shrud passed him on her way out of the cave, she kicked him in the side.

"Work fast, you lazy slave," she said.

This was more than Gamba could endure; it was the last straw, that he, a king, should be so abused and humiliated. He decided that death were better, but that he would have his revenge before he died, so he reached out and seized Shrud by an ankle, and as she fell forward he dragged her back into the cave. She clawed and struck at him, but he leaped upon her and drove his bronze dagger into her heart again and again.

When he realized what he had done, Gamba was terrified. Now he wished that he had gone with Dian, but perhaps she had not gone yet. He washed the blood from his dagger; and dragged Shrud's body to the very farthest end of the cave, where it was darkest; then he came out onto the ledge. Dian was nowhere in sight.

Gamba hastened down the ladders to the lowest level; and going to Dian's cave, he called her name; but there was no response. He started to cross the clearing toward the jungle in the direction that he thought Dian would take to reach the cove where their canoe lay; but he had gone only a short distance when Shrud's mate called to him.

"Where are you going, slave?" he demanded.

"Shrud has sent me into the jungle for fruit," replied Gamba.

"Well, hurry up about it," said the man. "I have work for you to do."

A moment later a runaway slave disappeared into the jungle.

IT was noon in the city of Tangatanga and in all directions the world curved upward to be lost in the mist of the distance that merged with the blue vault of heaven to form a dome, in the center of which blazed the fiery sun that hung always at zenith.

In the temple a frightened man sat on a bench in the little room, facing his god.

"It will be soon, most gracious Pu," he said; "and if they find that I have been here, they will kill me; for there are those who know that I know."

"How will it come?" asked David.

"A great crowd will come to the temple with offerings. There will be warriors among them, and they will press close to the dais; and when one gives the word, they will fall upon you and our Noada and kill you. Furp will not be here, so that no blame may be attached to him by the people; but it is Furp who is directing it."

David read aloud to the man the names that he had scratched upon the wall of the little room, the names of those who were loyal to him and to O-aa. He read them twice, and then the third time. "Can you remember those names?" he asked.

"Yes," replied the man; "I know them all well."

"Go to them, then, and tell them that Pu says that the time has come. They will know what you mean."

"As do I," said the man; and he knelt, covering his eyes with his hands; and then he arose and left the temple.

David returned to the dais and sat upon his throne; and presently O-aa entered from her apartments, with the lesser priests in their hideous masks and the drums, according to the custom of the temple. She came to the dais and seated herself beside David Innes.

"The time has come," he whispered to her.

"I have a sword and a dagger under my robe," she said.

Ope the high priest had never been able to persuade David to wear any robes of office, nor had David discarded his weapons. He had told Ope that Pu always dressed thus, and that it was only those who served Pu who wore the robes of office.

Time dragged heavily for these two, who might be waiting for death, but presently men commenced to struggle into the temple. David recognized some among these as those who were loyal to him. He held the first two fingers of his right hand across his breast. It was the sign that had been decided upon to recognize friend from foe; and all the men who had come in, even those whom he had not recognized, answered his sign.

They came and knelt before the dais and covered their eyes; and after they had been bidden to arise, they still staid close to the dais; and so that it might seem reasonable that they should remain there, David preached to them as he imagined a god might preach to his people. He spoke to them of loyalty and the rewards of loyalty, and the terrible fate of those who were untrue to their faith. He spoke slowly, that he might consume time.

MORE and more men were entering the temple. There were no women, which was unusual; and as each entered, David made the sign; and some of them answered and some did not, but those who answered pressed close around the dais until they entirely surrounded the three sides of it, the fourth side being against the wall of the temple.

David continued to talk to them in quiet tones that gave no indication that he anticipated anything unusual, but he watched them carefully; and he noticed that many of those who had not answered his sign were nervous, and now some of them tried to push through closer to the dais; but the loyal ones stood shoulder to shoulder and would not let them pass; and everyone in the temple waited for the signal.

At last it came. A warrior screamed, "Death!" Just the one word he spoke, but it turned the quiet temple into a bedlam of cursing, battling men.

Instantly the signal was given, the loyal ones had wheeled about with drawn swords to face the enemies of their gods; and David had arisen and drawn his sword, too.

The fighting men surged back and forth before the dais. One of Furp's men broke through and struck at O-aa; and David parried the blow and struck the man down; then he leaped to the floor of the temple and joined his supporters; and his presence beside them gave them courage and strength beyond anything that they had ever dreamed of possessing, and it put the fear of God into the hearts of the enemy.

Twenty of Furp's men lay bleeding on the floor and the others turned to flee the wrath of Pu, only to find that retreat was cut off; for, according to David's plan, a solid phalanx of his supporters, armed with bow and arrow, sword, and dagger, barred the way.

"Throw down your arms!" cried David. "Throw down your arms, or die!"

After they had divested themselves of swords and daggers, he told his people to let them go; but he warned them never again to raise their hands against Pu or their Noada.

"And now," he said, "go back to him who sent you; and tell him that Pu has known all his wicked thoughts and has been prepared for him; and because of what he has done he will be turned over to the people to do with as they see fit; and when you go, take your dead and wounded with you."

The vanquished warriors passed out of the temple with their dead and wounded, and David noted with a smile that they crossed directly to the house of the go-sha.

"It was easy to defeat the warriors of Furp when Pu was on our side," said one of David's supporters. "Now that will be the last of Furp, and Pu and his Noada will rule Tanga-tanga."

"Don't be too sure of that," said David. "Furp sent only a handful of men to the temple, for he did not anticipate any resistance. There will be more fighting before this is settled; and if you know of any more loyal men in the city, see that they are armed and ready to come at any moment. Let one hundred remain here constantly, for I am sure that Furp will attack. He will not give up his power so easily."

"Nor a chance to get all of our pieces of bronze as he once did," said one of the men bitterly.

The one hundred men remained and the others left and went through the city searching for new recruits.

David looked at O-aa and smiled and she smiled back. "I wish my eleven brothers had been here," she said.

WHEN Gamba entered the jungle, he commenced to run, hoping to overtake Dian; but the jungle was such a maze of trails that he soon realized that he was lost; and then he caught a glimpse of a large, yellow-striped creature slinking through the underbrush. Gamba was most unhappy. He wished that he had not killed Shrud, for then he would not have had to run away. He cursed the moment that Dian had come to Lolo-lolo; he cursed Dian; he cursed everybody but himself, who alone was responsible for his predicament; and, still cursing, he climbed a tree.

The tarag that had been stalking him came and stood under the tree and looked up and growled. "Go away," said Gamba, and picked a fruit that grew upon the tree and threw it at

the tarag. The great beast snarled and then lay down under the tree.

As soon as Dian had entered the jungle she accelerated her pace; and the two great beasts which accompanied her strode upon either side, for here the trail was wide. Dian was glad of their presence, for they suggested protection, even though she did not know whether or not they would protect her in an emergency.

Presently she came to a natural clearing in the jungle; and when she was half-way across it she heard her named called. Surprised, she turned about to see Bovar.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

"To the village," she said.

"You are going in the wrong direction, then. The village is back this way."

"These trails are confusing," said Dian. "I thought I was going in the right direction." She realized now that there was nothing to do but go back to the village and wait for another opportunity to escape. She was terribly disappointed, but not wholly disheartened; because, if it had been so easy to go into the jungle this time without arousing suspicion, there would be other times when it would be just as easy.

As Bovar came toward her she saw a tarag slink into the clearing behind him; and she recognized it immediately as the third member of the terrible trinity the affections of which she had won.

"You won't have to go back to the village now," said Bovar. "You can keep on going in the direction that you were."

"What do you mean?" demanded Dian.

"I mean that I think you were trying to escape, and I am going to help you. I know a cave deep in the jungle where no one will ever find us and where, when I am not with you, you will be safe from man and beast."

"I shall go back to the village," said Dian; "and if you will promise not to annoy me, I will not tell Hamlar nor Manai what you would have done."

"You shall not go back to the village," said Bovar. "You are going with me. If you do not go willingly, I will drag you through the jungle by the hair."

Dian drew her bronze knife. "Come and try it," she said.

"Don't be a fool," said Bovar. "In the village you are a slave. You have to clean three caves and prepare the food for four people and wash loincloths and fetch and carry all day. In the jungle you would have but one cave to clean and but two people to cook for; and if you behaved yourself I would never beat you."

"You will never beat me whether I behave myself or not," replied Dian.

"Throw down that knife," added Bovar. Dian laughed at him and that made Bovar furious. "Drop it and come with me, or I will kill you," he said. "You shall never go back to the village now to spread stories about me. Take your choice, slave. Come with me, or die."

TWO of the tarags stood close beside Dian, imparting to her a sense of security—whether false or not she did not know, but at least their presence encouraged her to hope. The third tarag lay on its belly a few yards behind Bovar, the tip of its tail constantly moving. Dian knew what that sign often portended, and she wondered.

Bovar did not know that the tarag had followed him, nor that it lay there behind him, watching his every move. What was in the great beast's mind, no one may know. Since cubhood it had

been taught to fear these men-things and their long, sharp spears.

Bovar took a few steps towards Dian, his spear poised to thrust. Dian had not thought that he would carry out his threat; but now, looking into his eyes, she saw determination there. She saw the tarag behind Bovar rise with bared fangs and then she had an inspiration. This cave girl knew what an unfailing invitation to any dangerous animal to attack is flight; and so she turned suddenly and ran across the clearing, banking her own safety on the affections of these savage beasts.

Bovar sprang after her, his spear poised for the cast; and then the great beast behind him charged and sprang, and the two which had stood beside Dian leaped upon him with thunderous roars.

Dian heard one piercing scream and turned to see Bovar go down with all those terrible fangs buried in his body. That one piercing scream marked the end of Bovar, son of Hamlar the chief; and Dian watched while the great beasts tore the chief's son to pieces and devoured him. Inured to savagery in a savage world, the scene that she witnessed did not horrify her. Her principal reactions to the event were induced by the knowledge that she had been relieved from an annoying enemy, that she now would not have to return to the village, and that she had acquired a long, heavy spear.

Dian went and sat down in the shade of a tree and waited for the three beasts to finish their grisly meal. She was glad to wait for them, for she wanted their company and protection as far as the entrance to the shaft which led down to the beach where her canoe lay; and while she was waiting she fell asleep.

Dian was awakened by something rubbing against her shoulder and opened her eyes to see one of the tarags nuzzling her. The other two had slumped down near her, but when she awoke they stood up; and then the three of them strode off into the jungle and Dian went with them. She knew that they were going for water and when they had drunk they would sleep; nor was she wrong, for when they had had their fill of water they threw themselves down in the shade near the stream; and Dian laid down with them and they all slept.

Gamba, in his tree a quarter of a mile away from the clearing where Bovar had died, had heard a human scream mingling with the horrid roars and snarls of attacking beasts, and he had thought that Dian had been attacked and was dead; and Gamba, who had been king of Lolo-lolo, felt very much alone in the world and extremely sorry for himself.

IN TANGA-TANGA, Ope the high priest was in a quandary and very unhappy. He and the lesser priests had all been absent from the temple throne room at the time that the followers of Furp had attacked Pu and the Noada; and now he was trying to explain his absence to his god. His quandary was occasioned by the fact that he did not know which side was going to win in the impending battle, of the imminence of which he was fully cognizant.

"It might have seemed a coincidence to some," David was saying, "that you and all of the lesser preists were absent at the time that Furp's men attaked us, but Pu knows that it was no coincidence. You absented yourselves when you knew that we were in danger so that the people might have no grounds upon which to reproach you, no matter what the outcome of the attempt might be. You must now deter-

mine once and for all whether you will support us or the go-sha."

The lesser priests were gathered around Ope at the foot of the dais and they looked to him for leadership. He could feel their eyes upon him. He knew the great numerical strength of the go-sha's retainers, but he did not know that Pu, also, had a great number, nor did he know that they were armed. He thought that Furp's warriors would be met, if at all, by an unarmed mob which they could easily mow down with arrow, spear, and sword.

"I am waiting for your answer," said David.

Ope decided to play safe; he could explain his reasons to Furp later. "We shall be loyal to Pu and our Noada in the future as in the past," he said.

"Very well, then," said David. "Send the lesser priests out into the city to spread the word among the people that they must arm themselves and be prepared to defend the temple."

Ope had not expected anything of this sort and he was chagrined, for at the bottom of his heart he hoped that Furp would succeed in destroying these two, that he might again enjoy to the fullest extent the perquisites and graft of his office; but he realized that he must at least appear to comply with Pu's instructions.

"It shall be done at once," he said. "I shall take the lesser priests into my private chambers and explain their duties to them."

"You will do nothing of the sort," said David. "The lesser priests have heard the instructions that Pu has given. They will go out into the city at once and with each one of them I will send one of these loyal citizens to see that my instructions are carried out honestly."

"But—" commenced Ope.

"But nothing!" snapped David, and he looked at the lesser priests. "You will leave at once, and you will each be accompanied by one of these men," and as he detailed those who were to accompany the lesser priests, he told them that they had his permission, the permission of their god, to destroy any priest who failed to exhort the people enthusiastically to defend the temple of Pu.

IT WAS not long thereafter that men commenced to congregate in the plaza before the temple. Through the great temple doorway David could see the house of the go-sha; and soon he saw warriors emerging from it, and others coming into the plaza from other directions. They marched straight toward the temple, before which stood the temple guards and the loyal citizens who had armed themselves to protect Pu and their Noada.

Furp's men tried to shoulder their way through to the temple, but they were immediately set upon, and the battle began. Soon the plaza was filled with the clash of swords, the shouts and curses of battling men, and the screams and groans of the wounded and the dying.

From every narrow, crooked street loyal citizens swarmed to the defense of the temple; so that not one of Furp's men ever reached the great doorway.

Who may know how long that battle lasted, for it was noon when it commenced and noon when it ended; but to David and O-aa it seemed like an eternity.

When the last of Furp's retainers who were not dead or wounded were driven from the plaza, the dead lay thick upon every hand; and David Innes was the master of Tanga-tanga.

Furp and a couple of hundred of his retainers had fled the city; and it was later discovered that they had gone to

Lolo-lolo and enlisted in the service of the new go-sha there, who was glad to acquire so many trained fighting men.

David sent word to the people that as long as he remained he would rule Tanga-tanga; and that when he left he would appoint a new go-sha, one who would not rob them; and then he sent for Ope the high priest.

"Ope," he said, "in your heart you have always been disloyal to your Noada and to Pu; therefore, you are dismissed from the priesthood and banished from Tanga-tanga. You may go to Lolo-lolo and join Furp, and you may thank Pu that he has not destroyed you as you deserve."

Ope was aghast. He was not prepared for this, as he had felt that he had played safe.

"B-but, Pu," he cried. "The people —the people, what of them? They will not be pleased. They might even turn against you in their wrath. I have been their high priest for many thousand sleeps."

"If you prefer to leave the issue to the people," said David, "I will summon them and tell them how disloyal you have been, and turn you over to them."

At that suggestion Ope trembled, for he knew that he was most unpopular among the people. "I shall abide by the will of Pu," he said, "and leave Tanga-tanga immediately; but it pains me to think that I must abandon my people and leave them without a high priest to whom they may bring their grievances."

"And their pieces of metal," said O-aa.

"The people shall not be without a high priest," said David; "for I now ordain Kanje as the high priest of the temple of Pu." Kanje was one of the lesser priests whom David knew to be loyal.

Ope was conducted to the gates of the city by members of the temple guard, who had orders to see that he spoke to no one; and so the last of David's active and powerful enemies was disposed of, and he could devote his time to plans for returning to Sari, after prosecuting a further search for Dian, who, in his heart of hearts, he believed to be lost to him forever.

HE SENT men out to fell a certain type of tree in a near-by forest, and to bring them into the city; and he sent hunters out to kill several boses, which on the outer crust were the prehistoric progenitors of our modern cattle. These hunters were instructed to bring the meat in and give it to the people; and to bring hides to the women to be cleaned and cured.

When the trees were brought in he had them cut into planks and strips, and in person he supervised the building of a large canoe with mast and sails and water-tight compartments forward and aft.

The people wondered at the purpose for which this strange thing was being built, for they were not a seafaring people; and in all their lives had seen only one craft that floated on the water — that in which their Noada had come to them.

When the canoe was completed, he summoned the people to the plaza and told them that he and the Noada were going to visit some of their other temples in a far land, and that while they were gone the people must remain loyal to Kanje and the new go-sha whom David appointed; and he warned Kanje and the new go-sha to be kind to the people and not to rob them.

"For, wherever I am, I shall be watching you," he said.

He had the people carry the canoe down to the nameless strait, and stock

it with provisions and with water, and with many weapons—spears, and bows and arrows, and bronze swords; for he knew that the crossing would be perilous.

The entire population of Tangatanga, with the exception of the warriors at the gates, had come down to the shore to bid Pu and the Noada farewell; and to see this strange thing set out upon the terrible waters. O-aa had come down with the people, but David had remained at the temple to listen to a report from some of the warriors he had sent out in search of a clue to the whereabouts of Dian. These men reported that they had captured a Lolololoan hunter, who claimed to have seen Gamba and Dian as they set forth upon the waters of the nameless strait in their little canoe. So David knew that if Dian were not already dead, she might have returned to Sari.

As he started for the gate of the city he heard sounds of fighting; and when he reached the gate he saw that his people by the shore had been attacked by a horde of warriors from Lolo-lolo and were falling back toward the city.

O-aa had been in the canoe, waiting for David, when the attack came; and in order to escape capture, she had paddled out upon the nameless strait, intending to hold the craft there until the attackers had been dispersed and David could come down to the shore; but the current seized the canoe and carried it out into the strait, and though she paddled valiantly, she could do nothing to alter its course.

THE ship in which Hodon sailed in search of the Sari and O-aa was named Lo-har, in honor of Laja who had come among the Sarians from the country called Lo-har. It was a little ship, but staunch; and Raj the Mezop brought it through the nameless strait, and out upon the broad bosom of the Korsar Az in safety; and there they were becalmed and the current carried them where it would. Their fresh water was almost exhausted and they looked in vain for rain; and then in the distance they sighted land, toward which the current was carrying them. When they were scarcely a mile off shore, the current changed and Hodon saw that they were going to be carried past the end of what he now saw to be an island; so he filled the canoe with empty water containers, and with twenty strong paddlers he set forth for the shore; and as he neared it he saw a waterfall tumbling into the sea over the edge of a cliff.

As the canoe was being drawn up on a narrow beach in a little cove at the far end of which was the waterfall, Hodon saw another canoe that had been dragged up on the shore; and while his men carried the containers to the waterfall to fill them, he investigated.

In the bottom of the canoe were strange weapons such as he had never seen before, for the swords he found there were of a metal he had never seen before, and the spears and arrows were tipped with it. Upon a thwart rested two tiny sandals. Hodon picked one of them up and examined it, and instantly he recognized it as the work of a Sarian woman; for the women of each tribe have a distinctive way of making their sandals, so that they are easily recognized, as are the imprints they make upon soft earth or sand.

What Sarian woman other than Dian the Beautiful could these tiny sandals belong to? She alone was missing from Sari. Hodon was excited, and he hastened to the waterfall to tell his warriors; and they were excited, too, when they heard that Dian might be on this island.

As the men filled the remaining bam-

boo containers Hodon discovered the little ledge behind the falls and, in investigating, found the opening into the cavern. He felt his way into it until he came at last to the bottom of the shaft where rested the crude ladder up which Dian's captors had taken her. Hodon returned to his men and they carried the fresh water back to the canoe; and as they looked out toward the Lo-har they saw that a breeze had sprung up and that the little ship was standing in toward shore.

AFTER the tarag, tired of waiting beneath the tree, arose and slunk off into the jungle, Gamba came down onto the ground and continued his flight. He walked quite a distance this time before he was treed again by sounds which he could not clearly interpret, but which resembled the growls of beasts mingled with the conversation of men; and presently there passed beneath him a dozen warriors, each one of which was accompanied by a ta-ho on a leash. Gamba recognized them instantly as Manats from the other side of the island; for, although he had never seen one of them before, he had heard them and their fierce fighting beasts described many times by the Tandars.

Gamba remained very quiet in his tree, for these Manats looked like fierce and terrible men, almost as fierce and terrible as their grim beasts.

And while Gamba watched them pass beneath him and disappear along the winding trail beyond him, Dian and her three beasts slept beside the little stream where they had quenched their thirst.

Dian was awakened when one of her beasts sprang to its feet with a hideous roar. Approaching were the twelve warriors of Manat with their fighting ta-hos. The three tarags, roaring and growling, stood between Dian and the approaching Manats.

With cries of encouragement, the Manats turned their twelve beasts loose; and Dian, seeing how greatly her defenders were outnumbered, turned and fled; and while the tarags were battling for their lives, a Manat warrior pursued her.

Dian ran like a deer, far outdistancing the Manat. She had no idea in what direction she was running. She followed jungle trails which turned and twisted, and which eventually brought her back to the very clearing in which Bovar had been killed, and there she saw the Manats and their fighting beasts, but there were only seven of the latter now. Before they had died, her tarags had destroyed five of them.

The warriors did not see Dian, and for that she breathed a sigh of relief as she turned and hurried back along the trail she had come—hurried straight into the arms of the warrior who had been following her. They met at a sharp turn in the trail and he seized her before she could escape. Dian reached for her dagger, but the man caught her wrist; and then he disarmed her.

"You came back to me," he said, in a gruff voice, "but for making me run so far I shall beat you when I get you back to the village of Manat."

Dian said nothing, for she knew that nothing she might say could avail her.

GAMBA, sitting disconsolate and terrified in his tree, saw the twelve terrible men of Manat return. There were only seven ta-hos with them now, but this time there was a woman. Gamba recognized her immediately and his sorrow almost overcame him—sorrow for himself and not for Dian; for now he knew that she could never lead him to the cove where the canoe lay

and that if he found it himself, he would have to embark on those terrible waters alone. It is wholly impossible that anyone could have been more unhappy than Gamba. He dared not return to the village; he did not know in which direction the cove lay; and he was alone in a jungle haunted by hungry man-eaters, he who had always lived in the safety of a walled city. From wishing that he had never seen Dian, he commenced to wish that he had never been born. Finally he decided to find a stream near which grew trees bearing edible fruits and nuts; and to live up in these trees all the rest of his life, coming down only for water.

While Gamba was bemoaning his fate, Dian, the leash of one of the dead ta-hos around her neck, was being led across the Island of Tandar toward the country of the Manats; but she was not bemoaning anything, nor being sorry for herself. She could not clutter her mind with useless thoughts while every moment it must be devoted to thoughts of escape. There was never any telling at what instant an emergency might arise which would offer her an opportunity; yet, deep in the bottom of her heart, her fate must have seemed utterly hopeless.

The warrior who had captured Dian was an ill-natured brute, and the fact that he had lost his ta-ho in the fight with the tarags had not tended to improve his disposition. He jerked at the rope around Dian's neck roughly and unnecessarily; and occasionally on no pretext at all, he cuffed her; and every time he did one of these things he was strengthening the girl's resolve to kill him. She would almost have abandoned an opportunity to escape for the pleasure of driving a dagger into his heart.

WITH all sails set, the John Tyler rode the waters of the nameless strait. Ja and Abner Perry and Ah-gilak stood upon the quarterdeck.

"I think," said Abner Perry, "that we should disembark a searching party as soon as possible. We may have a long shoreline to search and a big country, which we must comb until we find some clew to the whereabouts of Dian"; and the others agreed with him.

As they approached the shore the lookout shouted, "Canoe dead ahead."

As they bore down upon the little craft the bow was filled with warriors and Mezops, watching the canoe and its single occupant. They saw a figure in a long cloak and an enormous feather headdress; and when they got closer they saw that it was a woman.

O-aa had never seen a ship built or rigged like this one, which had evidently discovered her and was headed for her; but as far as she knew, only the men of the Empire of Pellucidar built any sort of ships, and so she hoped against hope that these might be men of the federation.

As the ship came about and lay to near her, she paddled to its side. A rope was thrown to her and she was hauled to the deck.

"Dod-burn it!" exclaimed Ah-gilak. "Gad and Gabriel! If it isn't O-aa! What in the name of all that's dod-blasted are you doing in that get-up, girl; and out here alone in a canoe?"

"Don't talk so much, old man," retorted O-aa, who could never forget that Ah-gilak had once planned on killing and eating her that time that they were being besieged in the cave by the sabre-toothed men. "Instead of talking," she continued, "get to shore and rescue David Innes."

"David Innes!" exclaimed Abner Perry. "Is David Innes there?"

"He is in that city you can see," replied O-aa, "and if the warriors from Lolo-lolo get in there, they will kill

him."

The ship was under way again and Ah-gilak brought it as close into shore as he dared, and dropped anchor. Then Ghak and his two hundred warriors, and all but about twenty-five of the Mezops, took to the boats and made for shore. Nearly three hundred veterans they were and they were armed with muskets; crude things, but effective against men of the stone age, or of the bronze age either; for, besides making a good deal of noise, they emitted volumes of black smoke; and those whom they didn't kill, they nearly frightened to death.

In a long thin line, as David had taught them, they approached the city where the warriors of Lolo-lolo were attempting to force the gates.

When they were discovered, the Lolo-loloans turned to repel them. Looking with contempt upon that long, thin line of a few hundred men who had the temerity to threaten a thousand bowmen. But the thunder of the first ragged volley and the black smoke belching at them, as twenty or thirty of their comrades fell screaming to the ground, gave them pause; but they advanced bravely in the face of a second volley. However, with the third volley, those who had not been killed or wounded turned and fled, and Ghak the Hairy One led his troop to the walls of Tanga-tanga.

"Who are you?" demanded a warrior standing upon the top of the wall.

"We are friends, and we have come for Pu," replied Ghak, who had been coached by O-aa.

Almost immediately the gates were thrown open and David Innes emerged. From the temple he had heard the firing and he was sure that it could have come only from the muskets of the empire.

Tears were streaming down Abner Perry's cheeks as he welcomed David aboard the John Tyler.

David listened while they told him of their plans to search for Dian, but he shook his head and told them that it was useless; that Dian had set out upon the nameless strait in a canoe with a single companion; and that if she were not already back in Sari, she must be dead.

O-aa had inquired about Hodon, and when she had been told that he had come this way in search of her, she begged David Innes to continue on through the nameless strait into the Korsar Az in search of him; as he must have gone there if he had not already been wrecked.

WHILE Gamba was searching for a stream where there were trees bearing nuts and fruits he was suddenly confronted by a band of strange warriors bearing weapons such as he had never seen before. He tried to escape them, but they overtook and captured him.

"Who are you?" demanded Hodon.

"I am Gamba, the go-sha of Lolo-lolo," replied the frightened man.

"I think we should kill him," said a Mezop. "I do not like the color of his skin."

"Where is Lolo-lolo," asked Hodon.

"It is on the other side of the nameless strait," replied Gamba, "where the country of the Xexots lies."

"You came from the other side of the nameless strait?"

"Yes; I came in a thing called a 'canoe'."

"Did you come alone?" asked Hodon.

"No; I came with a woman who said that she came from a country called Sari, and that her name was Dian the Beautiful."

"Where is she?" demanded Hodon.

"She was captured by the Manats,

who live on the other side of this island."

"Can you lead us there?"

"No," replied Gamba; "I am lost. I do not even know the way to the coast where our canoe lies. If I were you, I would not go to the country of the Manats. They are terrible men and they lead ta-hos, who would kill and devour you. There were twelve Manats who captured Dian, and they had seven ta-hos with them."

"Can you show us where she was captured?"

"I can show you where I last saw her," replied Gamba; and this he did. There the trail of men and beasts was plain and to these men of the stone age the following of that trail was simple. They marched rapidly and almost without rest; and though ordinarily it was three long marches to the village of the Manats, Hodon and his hundred warriors reached it shortly after the first sleep.

The men who had captured Dian had only just arrived and her captor had taken her to his cave.

"Now," he said, "I am going to give you the beating I promised you. It will teach you to behave. He seized her by the hair and, stooping, picked up a short stick; and as he stooped Dian snatched her bronze dagger that the man had taken from her from the sheath at his side, and as he raised the stick she plunged it into his heart. With scream he clutched at his breast; and then Dian gave him a push that sent him out of the cave to topple over the ledge and fall to the ground below.

A moment later she heard shouts and war cries; and she thought that they were caused by the anger of the Manats because of the killing of one of their fellows; and she stood in the shadow of the cave's entrance with the dagger in her hand, determined to sell her life dearly and take a heavy toll of her enemies.

FROM below rose the shouts of the warriors and the roars and growls of the ta-hos; and then, like a thunderbolt out of a clear sky, came the roar of musketry.

Dian could not believe her ears. What other people in all Pellucidar, other than the men of the empire and the inhabitants of far Korsar, had firearms? It was too good to hope that these might be Sarians; and if they were from Korsar, she was as well off here among the Manats as to be captured by the Korsarians.

She stepped to the mouth of the cave and looked out. The fighting was going on almost directly beneath her. The ta-hos were doing the most damage among the attackers, but one by one they were being shot down; for the Monat warriors, confused by the noise and the smoke, made only an occasional sally, only to be driven back with heavy losses; and at last the remnants of them turned and fled, as the last of the ta-hos was killed.

Dian had long since seen that these men were no Korsars. She recognized the copper skins of the Mezops and knew that she had been saved.

She stood upon the ledge and called down to them, and the men looked up and cheered. Then she went down and greeted Hodon and the others; and the first question that she asked was of David. "Why is he not with you?" she asked. "Has anything happened to him?"

"He left Sari in a balloon such as carried you away," explained Hodon, "in the hope that it would take him to the same spot where yours landed. We do not know what became of him."

"Why are you here?" asked Dian.

"We were looking for O-aa, who,

when last seen, was adrift on the Sari."

"How did you happen to come here and find me?" asked Dian.

"We landed on the island for water and I saw your sandals on the thwart of your canoe; then we came inland in search of you and we found a man who had seen you captured by these Manats. After that it was easy enough to follow their trail."

They started immediately on the long back trek to the other side of the island; and when they entered the jungle Gamba came down out of a tree where he had been hiding during the fighting.

"This man said that he came here in a canoe with you," said Hodon. "Did he offer to harm you in any way?"

"No," said Dian.

"Then we shall let him live," said Hodon.

As the Lo-har beat back toward the nameless strait on its return voyage to Amoz it sighted such a ship as no one there had ever seen; and Dian feared that it was a Korsar. The little Lo-har tried to escape, but the ship overhauled her as though she were anchored; and when it fired a shot across her bow, she came about; and then Hodon and O-aa and David Innes and Dian the Beautiful were reunited, for this strange ship was the clipper John Tyler.

FLASH! The April issue of *Fantastic Adventures,* our companion magazine, which features the fantasy side of imaginative fiction, will appear in special giant size! 244 pages from cover to cover. Ten great complete stories, by such authors as Manly Wade Wellman, James Norman, Don Wilcox, Robert Moore Williams, William P. McGivern, etc. It's now a truly great companion for AMAZING STORIES. Don't fail to get your copy.

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Colegrave watched the second hand of his wrist watch complete one circle and start on the next. Just a matter of seconds now and he would be rid of his secondary nature. By sheer will power, he had created a physical manifestation of his secondary nature . . . a schizophrenic double! Now, at exactly 12:03, in the state's execution chamber, his other self . . . tried and found guilty of murder . . . would be electrocuted. As the second hand started on the last quarter of the minute, Colegrave rose to his feet, glass in hand. "A toast to one who—" They were his last words. Why? What was the slip-up in his fiendish scheme . . . a scheme that had brought him a million dollars . . . that had killed two high public officials? For the answer . . . and for a story packed with plenty of thrills and chills . . . read "Double In Death," a great beginning for a great new author, Gerald Vance . . . one of the Ten outstanding tales in the big

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The Perfect Trap

by MILES SHELTON

Not a soul in the world knew of this cave, and then it became a trap. There'd be no rescue!

"GET back under the canvas, Doormat," I puffed at the smart-faced feline. "I've got this old handcar up to full speed, and I've got no breath for you. What's the sniffing about? You had two mice at midnight, just before we started down this spur line. You can't be hungry."

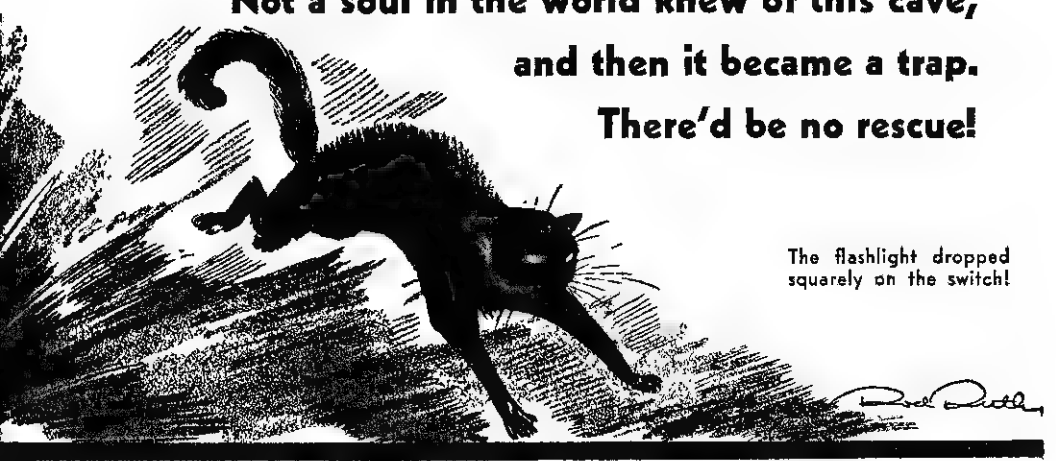
Then I knew. It was the sea breeze My pet cat had caught a whiff of dead fish. It beats all how sensitive a cat can be. And how many idiosyncrasies it can have. Maybe the smarter the cat is, the more peculiarities it has. Doormat had learned to sleep straight through the bombing attacks, even the close ones that practically split your eardrums. But the instant something with a mild perfume, such as a dead fish, tickled his smeller, he was right up on his pads.

"Stay in the handcar, Doormat!"

In another minute we'd be at the end of the line. There was no time to lose.

For months and months there had been no time to lose, but it was never truer than at this particular dawn.

The old sea was plumb lost. There was nothing out beyond the sloping sand but pea soup. I could barely make out a colorless cliff and a hint of the intake channel that Old John Ingerlusk



The flashlight dropped squarely on the switch!

built. Poor Old John. You never know where these damned bombs are going to strike next.

If it had to be one of us, it should have been me. John should have lived to see this big job through. It was all his invention, none of mine. But I was sure as hell going to try, just like he told me.

Now the handcar was on the downgrade to the end of the spur. The steel wheels clattered over the ties with a fresh burst of speed. I let go the handlebars and they kept right on pumping. That mystery must have been too much for Doormat. He drew his head back under the canvas.

There was the old power station, nosing out of the mountainside, just like we'd left it two days ago.

We! Old John and I . . . But I didn't dare let myself think of him any more. I have to keep up this fight of the last forty-eight hours, keep talking to myself like a fool, anything to hold my mind on the job—the job he'd almost completed—the job I might haze up if I wasn't careful.

That job was to make falling bombs dodge out of their paths and explode where they wouldn't do damage. Nobody but an eccentric inventor like Old John Ingerlusk would have had faith that it could be done. And it hasn't been done yet. But the bombs that fell two nights ago must have had a premonition that it was about to be done. So they plummeted down and got Old John . . .

WHILE the handcar coasted to a stop I beat my hands together. They were stiff from pumping. Cold, too. In no shape for a delicate fitting job. It would be a tragedy to chip or mar this precious chunk of metal. Old John's measurements, of course, would be accurate to the ten-thousandth, and he said the expansion and contraction for temperature changes was already taken care of. So I knew I wouldn't have that to worry about. But I might have to do a little sanding—or filing. "The irony of it," I kept saying to myself, and I wasn't making a pun on iron filings. I was thinking of this chunk of rare alloy. After the sizeable fortune Old John had had to pay, and all the red tape it had taken to get the magnesium through the government, what a waste it would be if I had to file an ounce of it off to make the core fit.

Now I was inside the big latticed steel gateway of our power station with my handcar and my precious cargo. I was careful to wrap the alloy core with cloth and canvas, and tie the wrappings on before I applied the hoist.

Doormat scrunched back toward the wall at the surprising sight. The hoist lifted the massive metal, slowly, deftly. Even a cat can't help admiring such a demonstration of controlled power. It's a cinch Doormat couldn't have lifted a baby kitten any more tenderly, even if he'd been a mother.

The hoist hung from a steel track overhead, so it was an easy matter for me to pull the loaded hoist along by hand power. I drew it through the long, low-roofed entrance passage into the big half-empty work room beyond.

This spacious, rock-walled room was cut deep in the hillside, and Old John had considered it an ideal place for a secret experiment of this kind. He had set up his small model here originally, and I had watched it work. And how it worked! If its success was any indication. I knew this big number would swerve bombs and falling shells like an autumn wind swirls leaves.

Yes, this new magnesium alloy, as Old John had told me many a time with a significant wink, would out-pull any other electromagnetic core like the sun

outshines a candle!

That was Old John's faith, and now it was mine.

I dropped the hoist chain and went to turn on some lights. It was just dark enough, back in this big room, that I could stir up a spark on Doormat's back, rubbing him the wrong way. Darned if that cat wasn't good for a few volts of static electricity even on damp days.

The eastern sky was brightening by this time, however, and as I looked back through the straight-walled entrance passage, I debated momentarily whether I should go back and swing the big steel latticed gates closed. But I knew perfectly well that no one would ever intrude.

AS I snapped on the lights I recalled the day I had helped Old John hoist those latticed steel gates and hinge them in place. Old John had said they would keep invaders out if war ever came, and besides, they would give us a regular checkerboard of holes to shoot through.

Now we were up to our necks in war —only five years since he had said it; but this place didn't tempt bombers any more than a straw-roofed pig shed. And the reason was simple enough. Not even our own friends had discovered that we had got our tidal power scheme to work. As far as the public knew, this place was nothing but a mass of steel and stones thrown together by a fanatical inventor.

A few of Old John's business associates had seen the plans on paper; but to them it was simply Ingerlusk's folly. They had never bothered to come to see the place, and he knew they never would.

That was the beauty of this location. Never an intruder. This was a bit of lost coast. The isolation wouldn't have been any more complete out on the Sahara Desert.

And the tides that furnished the power for this plant couldn't have been any better anywhere.

I've no doubt the enemy had every other powerhouse in the country charted as a war objective. That's where Old John was wise to let people think he was a fool. If they'd known how smart he was, the news of his experiment would have leaked out and he'd never have got this far with it.

How they used to rib him! "Power for the tides?" they'd jeer. "You're cockeyed. You've got your source of power only six or seven hours at a stretch, at best. The rest of the time you'll have to depend on a coal-burning plant." And Old John would say, "Maybe so, maybe so." Then they'd say, "If you're going to have to build a coal-burning plant big enough to carry the load, why waste your fortune harnessing the tides?" And Old John would shrug and say, "Maybe you're right. Maybe I'm a damned fool and a tinkerer." But he always went right ahead with his dream, undisturbed.

The generators were humming now. High tide or low, they went right on, always the same. For Old John Ingerlusk had fought his way through that wad of knots and had come out with the cleanest, surest constant pressure device that ever went into action.

I WENT into the turbine room, Doormat following at my heels until we got within sight of the sparks in the first softly singing generator. Doormat stopped. I never had to tell him to keep back. He seemed to have an instinctive distrust of sparks from any source other than his own back. And he had an aristocratic aversion toward being told something he already knew —which, in this case, was to stay be-

hind while I checked the oil cups. So he pretended, as usual, to have been distracted by the shallow pool of seepage on the concrete. He lapped up a little water, circled around the pool disdainfully, and settled down in a dry corner to wash his face. By the time I was ready to go back he had finished and was marching along a step ahead of me.

A streak of sun was piercing the spacious workroom, reminding me that the minutes were slipping away. My hands were no longer too cold for the job ahead. They had gathered warmth from the generators. The slight trembling of the fingers was nothing but nervousness.

I operated the hoist chains and the vast alloy core rode downward toward the gigantic electromagnet. The huge gleaming instrument was planted as solidly as Gibraltar in the central section of the concrete floor, and it was ready in every detail except for the insertion of this alloy core. Its thousands of wrappings had already tasted a test current, each section of the coiled wires having been tested separately. I could never forget the strange half-comical look on Old John's face when he had begun to guess the extent of this magnet's drawing power.

That was when he had changed his plan about mounting the instrument on a special track. He had decided that this final test would be simplified by planting the magnet in the floor to make it absolutely stationary. So the heavy rails we had procured to extend our railroad track straight into the work room had not been used. We had stored them overhead, over two ceiling cross-beams and jute-ending against a third, where they would be reasonably secure and out of the way for the test.

All forenoon I worked, as carefully as I could, and as swiftly as I dared. I had to bring a second hoist into action to secure a more accurate control of the lowering weight. On several trials the line-up missed by a fraction of an inch. I grew suspicious of the plumb rule, for no good reason, and also the measuring stick; so I deserted the fitting job to rummage through the supply shelves for other measures.

IN DOING so, I killed two birds with one stone. All these loose tools and scraps of junk had to be gathered up or fastened down before the test, because it was the business of this magnet to attract steel from far and wide. And the magnet wasn't made to discriminate between falling bombs and loose alligator wrenches.

Of course the supposition was, as John Ingerlusk had explained to me, that such things as falling bombs, being already in motion, would be much more responsive to the magnetic field than stationary iron or steel, such as steam radiators or hot water boilers. It doesn't take much to swerve a flying bullet from its course. But objects that are rooted down, like steel girders, or objects riding on tracks, like locomotives, don't go jumping off into space without a heck of a lot of physical persuasion.

"Bring me that canvas sack, Doormat," I said. "No, not that ball of waste. That canvas sack. . . . Go on . . . farther. . . . There. Bring me *that.*"

A dog could have obeyed me easily enough, but I had to coax to get any service out of Doormat, for all his training. Since I was standing up on a tool bench, filling my arms with scraps of sheet metal, pipe couplings, chains, and some pieces of baling wire, I kept cajoling the feline until he did what I wanted. He caught a corner of the sack between his teeth and hobbled over, pretty much on three feet. He

even tried to jump upon the tool bench but lost his hold.

"Good kitty, Doormat. For that I'll let you catch an extra mouse."

I threw scrap metal into sacks right and left and piled the stuff at the base of an upright steel beam. Then I threaded some baling wire through the canvas sacks and bound them all to the beam with a few twists of the wire.

Back to the core job once more! Having worked off a little nervous energy, my hands were surer. I steadied the core with one hand and operated the hoist chain slowly with the other. Little by little, the core lowered. It slipped snugly into place.

"Bring me the wrench, Doormat."

I pointed to the heavy tool lying on the concrete. The cat walked over to it, pawed at it, looked at me contemptuously, and walked away with his proud nose in the air.

I WENT over the instrument with the wrench and put the final pressure to every nut. The new core was now locked in its permanent prison ready for the test. The heavily insulated lead-in wires were all set to transmit the electrical impulse, ready for the final snap of the switch.

The switch had been placed, in accordance with Old John's insistence, about thirty-five yards away; which is to say, near the front of the entrance passage. This had been done so that the magnet could be turned on from a safe distance. We had found, during our tests with the small model, that this safeguard was a worthy one. For although we had meant to get all scraps of loose metal fastened down, the snap of the switch had proved there were a few oversights, particularly in dusty corners and piles of scrap lumber, where rusty nails and bits of tie-wire like to hold secret conventions.

The thought of those wisps of flying steel brought back a mental picture of Old John as I had last seen him. A different sort of flying steel had got him. I wondered if he had ever felt it, or if he had just gone out like a light. There hadn't been a hint of agony in his face, lying there. . . .

And to think, if it hadn't been for the war, he'd have been taking his bids from private power companies, or maybe the government, and this plant would have been selling juice as limitless as the tides.

But a war changes everything. The first bombs that fell on the capitol had set his mind to work, and he'd made me promise to keep the whole business a secret until we proved it.

I kept it. I didn't tell a soul, not even the girlfriend. At this very moment, as I neared the crucial step that would prove or disprove the magnet's power, I was aware that Alice had no idea where I was or what I was doing.

Something in the glitter of the noon sun on the silver waves had thrust Alice into my memory sharply. Or perhaps it was the low tide, reminiscent of that certain day when we waded out to Castle Rock and lingered to let the high tide come in and strand us there. Would there ever be another day like that? That was life at its best. . . .

And to think I had let Alice take a job in the munitions factory. In a basement, at that. Hell, if a bomb would ever strike . . .

"Don't tell anyone, not even your girl-friend." That was what old John had said to me. "When the time comes, I'll report to the government. That's all that's necessary. Overnight they'll build Ingerlusk magnets by the hundreds and dot them over the country to draw the bombs."

That was Old John's dream. He had drawn up all the blue prints for plant-

ing the magnets underground. He knew they would have to have plenty of insulation to take the pounding. But that part would be easy enough. In an age when bombers fly too high to be seen or heard, the need, he said, was for a completely new instrument to cancel out the danger.

I STARTED to put the blue prints in the handcar, and that, together with the fact that Doormat leaped out from under my feet and gave me a saucy snarl, shows how excited I was becoming. My wish was getting ahead of my achievement. I tossed the blue prints back to the tool bench.

The wish was to complete the test at once, to jump into the handcar, pump back to the little mining suburb as fast as possible. Then hop a bus into the city and deliver the facts and the blue prints into the hands of the proper governmental authorities. I was so eager that I was cutting corners.

But, stopping for a moment to get myself organized, I saw that there were three things that needed to be done—well, four, counting my obligations to Doormat—before I would have any good news to spill to the proper authorities.

The first was to finish the job of pick-up and tie-down; that is, to make sure the magnetic attraction wouldn't find any loose metal to draw except the metal I wanted it to draw for purposes of test.

I made a complete round of the premises, even surveying the intake channels and the water storage and pressure plants. At last I was satisfied that all loose steel and iron was accounted for and that no damage could possibly occur.

Secondly, I rolled the steel handcar off the rails onto the level concrete and set it at precisely fifty feet from the magnet. This handcar would be my test object.

Would the magnet be able to draw it into motion at that distance?

If not, I would shorten that distance and make additional tests.

My third item of final preparation was to build a loose barrier of timbers to catch the handcar in a wedge, in case it should coast toward the magnet with dangerous speed. I was not afraid of the magnet's being damaged, for John Ingerlusk had constructed a low concrete wall around it to protect it. But I was afraid the handcar might suffer injury. And the handcar, of course, was my only possible transportation back. This coast was too rugged ever to be bothered by fishermen, and there was nothing like a telephone in this lost bit of world.

"Doormat, get out from under my arm. Let go that tape line. I don't need any help taking measurements. There's fifty feet, and the car's got a wooden trap waiting to catch it. At last we're ready—almost."

Doormat seemed to sense that a momentous occasion was impending. He kept rubbing against my ankle and looking up questioningly—or perhaps he was trying to steal a little warmth.

"You'll get warm as soon as I throw a switch. What I mean, it'll warm up a plenty. You better keep back."

There was bound to be a great deal of heat in an electro-magnet of this size. Except for the latest adaptation of the Kapitza cooling system, such a coil would burn up. As Old John had said, we could thank that Russian for finding out how to use liquid helium on a job like this.*

* Peter Kapitza, a Russian, did some amazing work on magnetism in his special laboratory provided by Cambridge University, England. He employed liquid helium (near absolute zero) to cool the coils that produced powerful magnetic fields.—Ed.

"Keep back, Doormat," I warned again. "There'll be sparks—big ones—between those points. If you'd stray between them, or step across those lead-in connections, there wouldn't be the makings of a violin string left. Back! Come back with me out of danger."

I COULDN'T conceive of there being any danger as long as I was at the extension switch, several feet farther from the electromagnet than the steel handcar. It was danger to Doormat that I was considering. I wondered whether fuses as well as cat might not be burned out, in case the haughty feline chose to disobey orders.

As matters turned out, I shouldn't have wasted my worries on the cat.

Everything was ready.

I touched the switch and jerked it off again in the same split second.

On the instant there was a rip of steel car-wheels on concrete as the handcar scooted about twelve feet toward the magnet.

It stopped dead, instead of coasting on. I knew from the fact that neither wheels nor handlebars had turned, that I had left the brakes set. Brakes or no brakes, the steel car had jumped into motion at the touch of the switch. That magnet had power!

All my attention had been glued on the handcar, of course, but simultaneously I had caught several other impressions.

I was aware that a bit of steel had clanged somewhere back of me. Now as I turned I saw that the eight-inch key to the latticed steel gates had slipped off its peg in the stone wall and sailed to the floor.

I say "sailed" because it had landed eighteen or twenty feet this side of the peg.

I glanced curiously at the latticed steel gates and tried to remember whether I had left them in that position—half-way closed. I felt sure that they had been wide open. If so, that moment of magnetism had reached all the way out and swung each of them through a short arc.

After all these matters had been considered as calmly as my state of excitement would permit, there was still another lingering sensation. I seemed to have heard a curious *plop* from somewhere near the seashore.

I gazed out in that direction. The nearest patch of sea was at a gentle beach straight out from the power house entrance. There the waters were placid. What little regular slush of waves I could hear came from much farther out, where the sea battered tongues of jagged rock. However, I was convinced that the *plop* had come from the water nearer at hand.

I tried to tell myself that it was no more than a big fish jumping for a fly. But I wasn't too sure. The echo gave me a strange shudder.

I MADE ready for a second test, resolving that this one would make up for the failures of the first.

I released the brakes on the handcar so that it would roll into action freely. I placed it a full one hundred feet away from the magnet, still not quite as far away as my extension switch.

Then, taking in the huge latticed gates and the strip of sea at a glance, I decided upon one further safeguard. I pulled the two big gates closed across the entrance to the plant, locked them, and hung the steel key on a bit of wire, which I looped around one of the latticed bars and fastened securely.

Now there was a vertical checkerboard of steel between me and the outside world.

I reached for the switch. Doormat

was looking up at me as if waiting for me to press it. Just then a drop of dust fell on my hand. I glanced up.

There was nothing in motion above my head to account for falling dust. It could have dropped, of course, as a result of the slight circulation of air caused by my walking. But why did it happen this time and not some other time?

At once my suspicions were on a feather edge. My eyes rested on the twelve big steel rails that were stored directly overhead. Was it possible that that instant of magnetism had caused them to move?

It seemed almost incredible, but I was curious enough to investigate. I got a flashlight, climbed up on the handcar, craned my neck toward the nearest steel crossbeam. The roof of this entrance passage formed a shallow inverted V, which left six feet of space between the crossbeams and the apex. The twelve rails we had stored there were lined up in a direction parallel to the length of the entrance passage, pointing straight—or very nearly straight—toward the giant magnet. Therefore the attraction, if it made itself felt upon them at all, would tend to pull them longitudinally.

But, as I had previously noted, the rails were lying across two crossbeams, and their innermost ends were touching—or very nearly touching, as the case might be—the surface of a third and somewhat higher crossbeam. The beam would stop any rail that tended to slide longitudinally.

My only conclusion was that the outer end of a rail must have moved a fraction of an inch, being hurled a trifle straighter by the sudden magnetic—

"Doormat, get away from that switch! Get away—"

I was standing on the end of the handcar, which I had rolled to a point beneath the crossbeam nearest the latticed gates. In fact, I was half climbing, half hanging. That is, my feet were bearing upon the low end of the handlebars, and my left arm was hooked up over three of the stored rails. I had drawn my head up high enough to bring my eyes on a level with the dusty surface of the crossbeam, where my flashlight revealed that one of the three rails over my right shoulder had altered its position about a centimeter.

That's where I was when a glance floorward told me that Doormat was playing with the switch.

And that's when I yelled and dropped my flashlight.

And that's precisely when the whole works went into action full blast—for just as the obedient feline jumped back, the falling flashlight struck the switch.

THE handcar shot out from under my feet like an earthquake. Instinctively I tightened my grip on the rails on either side of my head—a natural thing to do when one finds himself suddenly depending upon his hands for support. But in this case it was just the wrong thing to do.

Even as my hands tightened, so did the rails. There was an almost noiseless slip, a little shower of dust against the light, and a sudden pressure of steel against both sides of my head. On the instant my skull was locked, as if between two locomotives.

I heard the handcar coast into the trap with a crash of wood. It must have struck a terrific blow. I couldn't see, because I was temporarily headlocked and my head was turned toward the latticed gate and the sea.

Did I say temporarily?

I squirmed to free myself but couldn't. An unspeakable terror shot

through me. If the rails should slip still closer together—

I pulled and tugged with all my strength, but I could not move my head in the slightest. The pain of that pressure was terrific. Part of my right ear was caught within the vise, and I would gladly have torn it from my head if that would have freed me. But I knew well enough that my head, damn it, was widest not at the ears but at a point an inch or more above them. I was caught.

If I relaxed the grip of my hands over the rails, the pains shooting through my head only became the more unbearable. Still, I realized that only luck had prevented my skull from being instantly crushed; for my head was no more than a soap-bubble to these massive rails. There were three of them on each side, packed together as tightly as floor boards. Obviously the magnetic pull had done its worst, as far as they were concerned.

But the drawing range of the magnet was not limited to one hundred feet, nor one thousand. The proof of its power came now, in such a swift and overwhelming demonstration that at first I thought it was some torture-maddened vision.

Through the little open squares in the steel lattice I saw the round object roll up out of the sea. It cut through the blue water like a strange spherical monster. It gained speed as it hissed across the gravel. The funnel-like shape of the coastline had headed it as straight as a bullet for the power plant gates.

It was bouncing, almost flying, toward me, glinting like silver, then turning black as it came into the power plant's afternoon shadow. I fully expected it to blast the latticed gates and me to hell and back. For it could be nothing other than a deadly floating mine.

THE thing struck the steel gates on a long low bounce. All the cavernous rooms back of me echoed that wild screaming clang. The gates wrenched at their hinges, the latticed bars bulged inward, but the explosive mine didn't break through.

And by some quirk of fate, it didn't explode.

It simply smashed the gate locks and stopped, hugging the vertical lattices that cut it off from its destination.

Now all was silent, save for the hum of the machine. My heart began to beat again, shooting pile-driver throbs through my imprisoned head. How long could I endure this deadly vise? Was there any way to fight off the blackness that was already threatening to sweep across my eyes?

I tightened the muscles of my arms all the way down through my shoulders; then, holding my neck and chest as rapidly as possible to relieve my skull of additional strain, I succeeded in swinging my legs upward and hooking my heels over the rails.

This change of position relieved my arms to some extent and helped to ward off the faintness. My thoughts grew a little clearer. Straws of schemes for undoing this mess floated through my mind and I clutched at them.

But instead of hitting upon any plausible ways out, I became more and more aware of the impossible trap I had fallen into.

The big latticed door was locked and the lock was smashed. There was no way out for me, not to mention the handcar, unless I managed to do some cutting with a blow torch. Old John had had an acetylene torch once; but in my clean-up of loose metals I hadn't run across it. Perhaps it could be

found if I could get free. Perhaps there would be fuel—perhaps not.

If someone would only pass within hearing—but no one would come this way—not once in a month of Sundays.

The only real likelihood of a break through the latticed door wasn't a pleasant one. That likelihood sprang from the fact that this magnetic field must be much more powerful than I had originally guessed. It might extend miles out into the sea to pull in other floating mines.

Yes, the more I thought of it, the more probable it seemed that a number of deadly mines might already be on their way. The first one to arrive would surely blast the lattices to splinters. Trapped as I was, I would get that jaunt to hell and back—I and all my little atoms.

It was a certainty that the electromagnet would keep right on operating full blast. Weeks could pass before the power machinery would ever grind itself out for lack of oil. Of course, the heat of the magnet might do something —or that darned cat might be persuaded to cause a short circuit—or—

But I was growing too wild from the swelling, throbbing pains in my head to hold myself down to any deliberate thinking. It was high time to act quickly or the time for action would be gone for good.

But what could I do?

What would *you do?*

THE END

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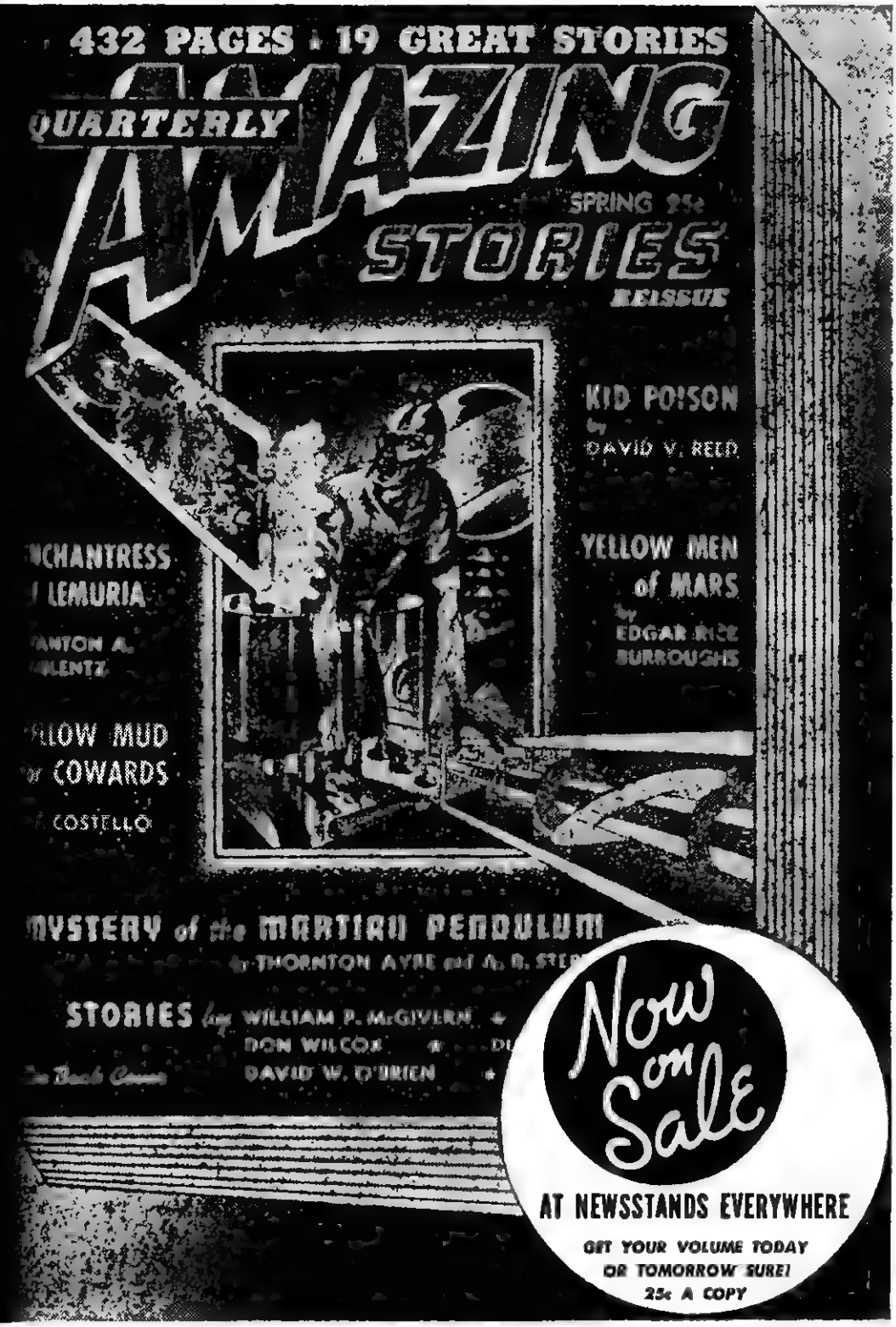
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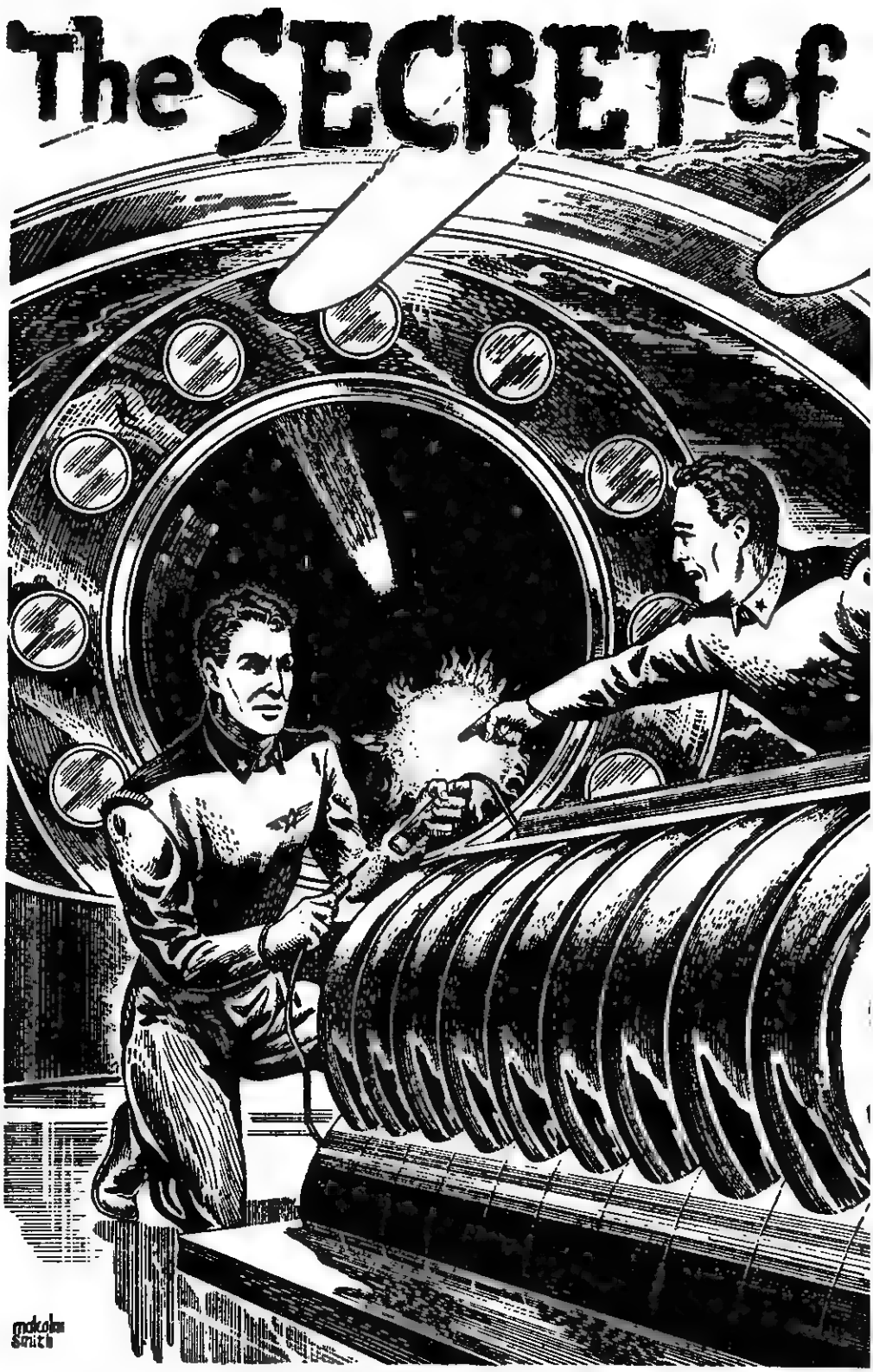


"Plug it in," said Logan. "It's our last chance!"

LUCKY LOGAN

By

NELSON S. BOND

Lucky Logan had never lost a bet—and he was betting his very life this time. How could he be so certain he would win?

WELL, we lost Bub Watson at Mars Central Spaceport. I didn't think it was in him, but somehow or other he managed to wriggle through his exams, and the night before the *Sirius* was scheduled to lift gravs for her return trip to Earth, Bub came by to say so long and pick up his ditty bag.

We had three or twelve drinks all around, according to custom, and we handed the chit to Bub, which was only good common sense, and as he paid the bill for our D.T's, he said, "Well, O.Q., it's worth it to get off this void-perambulating madhouse. Goodbye,

you space-happy lunks, and good luck!"

Joe Sanderson, our First Mate, hiccoughed delicately and said, "So you're going into the Patrol, eh? So you're going to become a great big two ray-gun he-man with a Lens on your wrist and hair on your chest? Well, best o' luck, chum! Think of us when you're dying in agony in some filthy Outland pesthole."

"Not him!" sniffed Rube Ballard, the Second. "If I know Bub, he'll put in for a nice, easy lightship post, where he can catch up on lost sleep and press waffles on his aft in a cane-bottom chair. Good old Bub!" he added affectionately, and reached for the bottle.

Bub just grinned.

"You're just jealous," he said. That's what's the matter with you. The whole damn bunch of you are mad because I'm finally getting into active service, and you have to stay here and play nursemaid to a bunch of pipsqueak passengers."

"The Passenger Service," I said with quiet dignity, "is the backbone of the interplanetary space fleet—"

"Comets to you, Jimmy!" mocked Bub. "You know what a backbone is, don't you? A long and dreary necessity with a headache at one end and a kick in the pants at the other. It isn't so bad for *you*, maybe. You're not a brevetman like Joe and Rube and Tommy—" He nodded at each of his former mates in turn. "You're the money-bags. A civilian officer. But *I* know, and *they* know, how monotonous bridge routine becomes on a passenger liner. No thrills, no excitement—"

"—and no early graves," concluded Tommy Randolph, the Third, "on hostile planets. Give it a rest, Bub. If you want to play hero, that's O.Q. with us. Only thing we'd like to know is—who's your replacement? If he's as bad a Fourth as *you* were—"

Bub said peevishly, "That's a hell of a way to talk about an officer of the Solar Space Patrol. But, oh, well—never mind! I don't exactly know who he is, Tommy. A fellow named Hogan, or Grogan, or something like that."

"Old hand?" asked Sanderson.

"Uh-uh. Cadet."

"Out of the frying pan," groaned Ballard, "into the fire! Hold your hats, boys, here we go again! A nice little pink-cheeked recrooty, fresh from the Space Academy. I never saw one yet who didn't think he knew more than—whuzzat?"

"That" was the intercommunications audio humming to life. The visiplate glowed and upon it appeared the all-too-familiar features of our skipper, Capt. Benedict Burke, known throughout the spaceways as "Hurry-up" Burke for reasons too obvious to mention. For a moment he glared at us, then:

"*Mister* Lincoln!" he snapped.

"Y-yessir?" I said.

"Stop trying to conceal that bottle and come to the bridge immediately! The new Fourth has come aboard. You are to show him to his quarters. Hurry up!"

"Yessir!" I said. "Right away, Capt—" But I was talking to myself; the panel was already dark. There was one good drink left in the bottle. I threw it down the hatch and galloped topside.

BUB WATSON hadn't known the new Fourth Mate's name. I still didn't know it after Cap Burke's introduction.

"Mr. Grrzzlph," he growled, "this is Lt. Smlgp, our new Fourth. Please show him to his quarters, so he can get a good night's rest. We lift gravs

for Earth in the morning."

"Very good, sir," I said, "This way, Lieutenant—"

"You'd better stop by the Officer's Lounge," warned the Old Man, "and suggest to my alleged aides that they break up their little brawl. The same advice, I might add, applies to you, Mr. Lincoln. You have a passenger list to make up in the morning, and manifests to clear. Well, run along! Hurry up!"

We said, "Aye, sir!" and left. In the corridor, my new acquaintance looked at me sidewise and grinned. "Quite a man, eh?" he said. "Crusty old character, no?"

"Don't mind him," I said. "His Burke is worse than his bite. Only thing is, the Old Man doesn't approve of 'the Cup that cheers'. He's a strict teetotaller—"

Lt. Whatever-his-name-was looked down at me, a huge chuckle on his lips. When I say "down" I mean just that. He was a big youngster, three or four inches over six feet. But he wąsn't lanky or gangly. Studying him for the first time, I saw that he was stacked up like the retouched photograph of a professional strong man. Strong, muscular throat . . . shoulders like T-beam girders . . . narrow waist and flat thighs . . . all this surmounted by a large, well-shaped head crisp with tiny black curls, gray-eyed, lean-nostrilled, with features as clean-cut and regular as those of any Greek god. He was a handsome lad—and I don't mean just pretty. He was the stuff!

But he was chuckling now. He said, "A teetotaller, eh? You wouldn't care to lay a little bet on that, Lincoln?"

"Bet?" I repeated. "I don't understand."

"I've got a hunch you're wrong," he laughed. "As a matter of fact, I've ten credits that says the skipper is having a wee, private snifter right now, at this moment."

I stared at him for an instant. I could hardly get my hand into my pocket quick enough. "Ten credits?" I cried. "I'll take that, pal! That's what I call easy money. Here's where we have to do a little justifiable spying, though. How about this keyhole? You peek first. It's your party."

"No, you go ahead," he said. "Quietly, though. He probably wouldn't like it if he knew we—"

It's a good thing he warned me to be quiet, because I was on my knees, now, before the door. And what I saw made me gasp like a mermaid on a sandy beach. The Old Man had his head tilted back. There was a bottle in his hand, the bottle had a label—and the label *didn't* say "Cough Medicine". The label said OLD MARINER. It also said, "Guaranteed nine years old . . . Bottled in Bond, Galactic Distilleries, Inc." It said, "90 Proof!"

My new friend smiled at me pleasantly. "Satisfied, Lincoln?" he asked. "Ten credits, please—"

I dug the bills out of my moth-proof wallet, handed them to him with shaking fingers. I stared at him. "But how did you know?" I croaked. "I would have sworn on a crateful of invoices the skipper never touched a drop! How—"

He shrugged.

"Call it a hunch. I'm pretty lucky, I guess. They all used to think so at the Academy—"

Academy! That did it. The names by which Bub Watson and the Old Man had called him paraded suddenly before my memory. "Lt. Smlgp"! Hogan! Grogan! Came the dawn. And I yelped my astonishment.

"Logan!" I hollered. "You're 'Lucky' Logan!"

And the new Fourth nodded pleas-

antly.

"Why, yes," he acknowledged. "That's my name."

WELL, hell, I should have known! Should have known the moment I clapped eyes on that build, that handsome pan of his. I had heard—and what spaceman had not?—plenty about Christopher "Lucky" Logan who, though still a space fledgling barely over his majority, was already on his way to becoming something of a legend to the men who go out to the stars in ships.

Lucky Logan—acknowledged to be one of the finest athletes ever to win five Academy letters, alleged to be the smartest gambler to ever lay a wager, rumored to be the wildest, whackiest, brain-stormingest youth to ever wear blues—*he* was Bub Watson's replacement!

Logan's outrageous luck was the talk of a universe. It wasn't even *logical* luck. When he played football, people said the holes opened before him miraculously every damn time he toted the leather. Three times during his college career he was guilty of screwball conduct that should have cashiered him into the discard—but each time Lady Luck tossed the die his way and saved his neck. Once when, taking an examination, he based his entire thesis on the possibility of faster-than-light radio transmission, a theory at that time contrary to every known fact. Since passing or flunking depended on this one question, he would have been booted out of school for his crackpot assumption—had not that very week *another* nutsack, Lt. Lancelot Biggs of the space-lugger *Saturn,* invented a new type of uranium speech-trap that proved Logan's theory right!

Then there was the time when, in direct violation of orders, he changed course on the schoolship he was piloting. They yanked him before a drumhead courtmartial for that little act—and two winks of an eyelash before the Commander could strip him of his rocket, a terrified lookout burst into the room and informed all and sundry that a black rogue asteroid had just smashed by within three hundred miles of their course, and that if the course had not been changed by Logan, every one of them would now be frozen spacemeat!

Well, I didn't know whether to bubble with glee or despair. But I did know that if I let Logan get to his berth without having met his fellow officers, my position as Purser and Supercargo on ye goode shippe *Sirius* would be comparable in comfort to the position of a Hindu yogi slumbering on his bed of red-hot needles. So I grabbed Adonis' arm and tugged him toward the lounge.

"Come on!" I pleaded. "It ain't beddy-bye time for you yet! You got things to do and folks to meet!"

Thus we burst in on the boys unexpectedly. Nor had they exactly abandoned the party simply because I had gone. To compensate for my absence, they had opened up a few more bottles and now they were concentrating on emptying 'em. As we entered, Bub and Rube Ballard were attempting a little bit of murderously close harmony on "Venus Nell", while Sanderson was painstakingly explaining to Tommy Randolph the Jones-Hake theory of intragalactic spore permeation. Which was rather a waste of time, I thought, inasmuch as Tommy was busy in a far corner, trying to stand on his head.

Four heads swivelled around as we entered, though, and eight eyes stared at us owlishly as I introduced my find.

"Boys," I chortled, "put on the rubber gloves. Get ready for a shock. I want you to meet the new Fourth

Mate— Lieutenant 'Lucky' Logan!"

IT TOOK a few seconds for that to seep through the alcoholic mists, but when it did, the result was worth waiting for. The four men stiffened like strychnine victims, and Randolph spoke for the crowd when, in an awed voice, he said, "Lucky Logan!"

"Himself," I said proudly, "in person, and not a disney. Logan, these are Lieutenants Sanderson, Ballard and Randolph, your future bridge companions. The soggy looking thing at the table is Lt. Watson, whose place you are taking. My advice is to greet him now and forget him instantly."

Logan said, "How do you do, gentlemen?"

Tommy was still very, very spiffed. Otherwise he'd not have said what he did, because he's a nice youngster. He gazed at Logan open-mouthed and open-eyed. And, "Great balls of fire!" he said, "the synthetic superman himself!"

The minute he said it, he flushed scarlet. Silence fell over the room; awkward silence; and I suddenly remembered another of the whacky tales people told about Lucky Logan. His old man, Dr. Theophilus Logan, had been something of a wingding himself. A brilliant man, his mind had apparently been affected when his wife died in childbirth; he had taken the newborn child and moved bag and baggage to Mars Central, then a desolate frontier outpost of civilization.

There he had raised his child according to a certain secret theories of his own. No one knew about this, you know, until years later. Then Dr. Logan had indiscreetly revealed that in Christopher's diet had been planted certain formulae, in his training certain psychological novelties had been used, that made the boy "—a forecast of the superman who someday shall rule the universe" was the way Logan had phrased it.

Well, the newspapers and telecasters got hold of the story, and they gave it the merry-go-round. They hooted and hollered, they employed famous psychiatrists and alienists to study Christopher Logan. When it turned out that he was just another very frightened, very sadly confused boy, they turned the full battery of their scorn on old man Logan. For a year or so, life must have been unbearable for both father and son; then the affair had died down, as things have a habit of doing, and their lives had reverted to normalcy.

But every once in a while some idiot —like Tommy now, or like the sportscaster who went haywire when Lucky scored eight touchdowns against Fontanaland University in the Earth-Mars annual Bowl game—cracked wise with a reminder of this unhappy interlude in Logan's past.

And it must have been embarrassing to Logan, too—because glancing at him I saw that his cheeks were as crimson as Tommy's. But his gray eyes remained calm, and he tried to pretend he had not even heard the remark.

"I'M VERY glad to be here with you gentlemen," he said. "The *Sirius* is a fine ship. I'm proud to be one of her officers."

"And we're glad to have you, Logan," said Sanderson. But you couldn't much blame him for being curious. After all, a man with Logan's reputation—"But tell me," asked Joe, "is it true that you're blessed with amazing luck? That's what people say, you know."

Logan smiled. "Blessed," he said, "or cursed. It's hard to say which. Well, yes, Lieutenant, I suppose I am an exceptionally lucky man."

Bub Watson was just bleary enough

to be belligerent. Over in the corner he was mumbling. Now he said, "'Sa lotta hogwash! Don' b'lieve a word of it. No sush thing's luck!"

Logan glanced at him shrewdly. He said, "No, maybe not. You're Watson, aren't you? Mmm-hmm. Well, Watson, some people call it luck; *I* prefer to call it—well, hunches!"

Bub grunted. "Don' b'lieve in hunshesh! No sush thing—" he persisted doggedly.

"For instance," said Logan, "there's a little hunch I happened to have right now. There's no logical basis for it, you understand—but when I get these things, I simply can't control them. I have a strong hunch that *you*, Watson, have a physical peculiarity—"

Bub started. "Huh? Whuzzat? 'Sa lie!"

"I have a hunch," continued Logan suavely, "that on your left foot you have six toes. You'll admit I have no way of knowing whether or not this is so, but—"

Bub's grumble turned to a howl. "Sixsh toesh! 'Sa *damn* lie! No such thing—"

"—and furthermore, I'm willing to back my hunch," Logan offered, "with a little wager of—oh, let's say twenty credits—"

Oh, boy, did he get takers! We all hollered at the same time. I'd seen Bub Watson in the showers a dozen times. I knew there weren't any extra toes on either of his feet. So did the others. Quick as I was, Sanderson and Watson got the jump on me.

"I'll take it!" they yelled in unison, then looked at each other. Joe backed down ungraciously. "Oh, all right. It's your foot, Bub."

And triumphantly, Bub Watson sat down and stripped off his left boot, his left sock, wriggled his foot before Logan's eyes for the lucky lad's inspection—

There were exactly five toes on Watson's left foot!

Gleefully, Bub tucked away the bills Logan handed him. He wouldn't have been human if he hadn't gloated a bit over his victory.

"Looksh like your luck ran out that time, Logan," he taunted. "Guessh that'll teach you not to make foolish bets any more. Twenty nice fat creditsh—"

But the smile had not faded from Logan's eyes. It was even more serene than before. He said, "Yes, I guess so, Bub. Do me a favor, will you? Don't put your shoe on—"

He stepped to the wall audio, pressed the button to the bridge. An instant later the face of Captain Burke shone down on us. "Well, Logan, what is it?" he demanded. "Didn't you go to your bunk? What are you doing in the Lounge? What do—" Then his jaw dropped, his eyes jolted open. A bellow split his throat. *"Watson!* Am I seeing things? Do you have your *shoe* off?"

"Yesh, shir!" chortled Bub proudly. "Lucky Logan's luck ran out on him, shir. I made 'im a lil bet—"

Cap Burke turned to Logan numbly. His voice was an empty husk. "I—I'll see you first thing in the morning," he said—and blanked out.

Sanderson stared at Logan curiously. "What's this all about, Logan? What did he mean?"

The new Fourth smiled modestly. "Well, you see, it seems Captain Burke had heard of my—er—luck. When he welcomed me aboard, he undertook to advise me against gambling. He wanted to teach me a lesson, so—"

"So?" I prompted.

"So before I left the bridge," explained Logan, "he and I made a little bet. A hundred credits. I—er—I bet

him I could make Bub Watson take his left shoe off within five minutes after meeting him . . ."

WELL, if that's "luck", I'm a monkey's uncle—and no cracks, please! When you give twenty to win a hundred, it ain't luck, it's logic.

But do you know, the boys wouldn't take that bit of finoodling as conclusive evidence that Logan was the wise lad he was supposed to be? I don't know why it is, but let a man get a reputation in some line and immediately every Tom, Dick and Harry wants to try to beat him at his own game. Look how stumblebums fall all over themselves trying to get into a ring with fight champions, and watch the suckers lining up in front of a dice table.

During the next three or four days, Sanderson, Ballard and Randolph spent all their waking hours trying to prove they were just as clever, and just as lucky, as Lucky Logan. All they proved is that a fool and his money are soon parted. Because Logan simply couldn't be beaten at any game of skill, chance or logic. He took 'em at stud and at craps, at high-low and at matching coins.

Me, I didn't get sucked into any of this craziness. As combined Purser and supercargo aboard the *Sirius*, I've got all the job I can handle once the ship lifts gravs. I had to make out passenger lists, prepare invoices and port clearance statements, arrange for freight transshipment and quarantine inspection—all that stuff.

So I was as busy as a hound in an apple orchard for the next few days. Meanwhile, the *Sirius* plowed ether like a dream, maintaining her routine cruising speed of 200,000 mph. and Earth, as viewed through the observation chamber panels, was daily becoming larger, greener, nearer.

It was on the evening of the fifth day that I stood in the observation chamber, looking out upon the never-ending marvel of star-spangled space, when Lucky Logan came to stand beside me. All the passengers had turned in; save for us and the night-watch, a pilot on the bridge and an engineer in the motor-room, every other living soul aboard was asleep.

"Lovely, isn't it, Jimmy?" he said.

"If you mean that the way it sounds," I replied cautiously, "the answer is yes. But if that innocent-appearing opening remark is the prelude to a little bet of some kind—"

"Oh, don't let's talk about bets, Jimmy," he sighed. "Let's not talk about luck or bets or hunches. Sometimes I get so weary of pretending—"

He stopped suddenly. I stared at him.

"Pretending?" I repeated.

"Skip it, Jimmy. It was a slip of the tongue."

"I know all about them slip of the tongues," I told him sagely. "They've usually got something behind them more than mixed-up vocal cords. Maybe it isn't any of my business, Lucky, but—come clean. What's on your chest? Maybe you'd feel better if you told somebody."

"I told you," he said half-angrily—and I couldn't tell whether his anger was directed at me or at himself, "it was merely a slip of the tongue. Forget it, please. Let's just look at the stars and lose ourselves in the beauty of—*Hey!*"

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Look! That way. Off to the right and a little below Alioth—"

I LOOKED in the direction designated. To the right and a little bit below Epsilon Ursae Majoris there was a dot, a bright gleam of light that

shouldn't be there. I gasped.

"A nova! Boy, what do you think? Hey, I bet the Old Man would like to see this! I'm going to wake him—" I started for the doorway. But Lucky stopped me.

"Wait, Jimmy! That's no nova; that's a new comet! And unless I'm very much mistaken—Come on! We've got to get down to the radio turret!"

Sparks was drowsing in his chair when we highballed into his turret, but five minutes later the last vestige of sleep was banished from his eyes as we dictated our message to Lunar III and waited for a reply. He looked at Logan admiringly.

"Gee, some guys have all the luck! I'll bet a hat you were the first guy to see this. Now they'll name it after you, and—"

Lucky said tightly, "I'm not concerned about that. What I'm wondering is how a comet should appear so suddenly, without its presence ever having been suspected. We didn't get any observatory reports on this one. Which means it must have appeared without warning. And *that* means—"

"Speed!" I broke in. "Tremendous speed!"

"Right! And it's moving in the general direction," said Logan worriedly, "of our Solar System!"

Then before the full import of his words struck me, Sparks' receiver started chattering, and our answer came back from Lunar III. And the answer justified Logan's fears by a thousandfold.

"Position of new comet verified," read the message, "by three Lunar, seven Earth observatories. Mass and weight not yet ascertained, but speed determined as highest ever yet recorded. From initial observations, Prentiss of Copernicus Observatory fears comet will approach within three degrees of Earth's sun. Further reports later."

That was all. It was enough. I'm not a trained astrogator, nor is Sparks, but both of us had enough space-learning to know what that meant. We looked at Lucky Logan with haggard eyes, and his answering gaze was equally dismal.

I said, "Three degrees! But, Lucky, that means—"

And he nodded slowly. "Yes, Jimmy. The death of an empire—Man's empire! The destruction of the Solar System!"

I CAN'T tell you exactly what happened then, because everything happened at once. I remember racing down to Capt. Burke's quarters, rousing him, bringing him to the bridge. I guess Logan must have audioed the other officers, for they all were there; Joe and Rube and Tommy, even Chief McMurtrie and his Assistant Engineer, Bob Evans.

Swiftly, Logan explained the situation. His statement was greeted with blank dismay. Then, because spacemen do not meekly surrender, even in the face of insurmountable odds, suggestions started pouring forth.

Cap Burke stoutly refused to believe that the situation was as dire as it had been painted.

"Nonsense!" he declared. "The Solar System has endured for aeons; it will live for aeons more! Just because a new comet has been sighted is no reason for falling into panic. Anyhow, this is all a matter of snap judgment. Astronomers are always crying doom. After they've checked their figures, they'll probably decide the comet won't come any nearer than Pluto. Or if it does come nearer, what then? The Sun is so large that it will shrug it off—"

He was whistling in the dark, of

course. He knew as well as we did that if this weird extra-galactic visitor were to approach within three degrees of Sol there would be a duplication of that horrendous event which, untold ages ago, had brought Earth and the rest of Sol's cosmic family into being.

Two mighty, flaming monsters brushing each other in space. Great arms of fire, tidal waves of scorching death and destruction, stretching toward each other. Tremendous flames hurtling from comet to Sun, from Sun to comet; all ether ruddy in that seething cauldron. Little Mercury plummeting into the fiery bosom of the Sun . . . Venus' steamy jungles parching, the volcanic core of Earth bursting its thin skin in a thousand places, mighty Jupiter reeling in its course . . . these were but a few of the lesser things that *might* happen.

The chatter of the receiving set put the lie to his guess. Joe Marlowe was reporting again from Lunar III. There was something like hysteria in his call.

"Previous information on comet now verified. Earth doomed. Entire Solar System liable to destruction, scientists claim. Terrestrial, Martian, Venusian governments organizing all available spacecraft for evacuation to outer planets.

"*Flash!* All craft in space! Proceed instantly to nearest colonized planet, take aboard full complement of refugees and sail top speed for New Oslo, Uranus! Keep tuned to this wavelength. That is all."

TOMMY RANDOLPH stared at us starkly.

"It's impossible!" he choked. "There aren't that many spacecraft. They can't save one man out of a hundred thousand. But—but we've got to do our share. Skipper?"

"It's a toss-up," said Burke grimly. "We're as far from Mars as from Earth. We might as well go on into Luna."

Chief McMurtie nodded dourly.

"We'll have to, Captain. We haven't enough fuel to reach Uranus unless we restock. Even so, it will take us ten weeks or more to reach Uranus. In that time—" He shrugged.

"Ten weeks!" That was Lucky Logan. "But certainly it won't take us that long, Chief! Surely the *Sirius* is equipped with one of those new velocity-intensifiers?"

"If you mean the experimental V-1 unit," glowered McMurtie, "invented by that Biggs chap, yes, we have one. But we were issued strict orders not to attempt to use it. Both times he tried to use it on the *Saturn*, something happened to the ship. The last time Biggs was killed, Heaven rest him."

"But this is an emergency! We've got to use it! I have a hunch—" A look of calculation come suddenly into the young Fourth's eyes. "I have a hunch that if we stepped up our velocity, went out to meet—"

"*Mister* Logan!" Cap Burke's temper was frayed. He whirled on Logan determinedly. "I'll ask you to remember you are fourth in command aboard this vessel. This is no time to listen to your 'hunches'. It will take more than mere 'luck' to get us out of a perilous situation."

"But, sir—"

"That will do! Now, gentlemen, here are my orders. We will not inform the passengers of this emergency. There is no reason for creating amongst them the confusion and despair we ourselves have been made subject to.

"We will proceed as swiftly as possible to Luna, and there assume whatever part in the evacuation plan is allotted to us. I see no other course to

pursue. Now, I advise all of you to go to your quarters, get as much rest as possible. You will need all your energy and vitality in the evil days before us. Goodnight, gentlemen!"

"But, Captain—" tried Logan again.

"Goodnight, Lieutenant!" said Burke again firmly. And that was all Lucky could get out of him. We retired.

WE retired, but we didn't sleep. How could we? The Earth doomed, our loved ones in danger, Man's hard-fought-for civilization, his empire of the stars destined to die beneath flames of a holocaust—how could we sleep?

But orders are orders. When I awoke the next morning I found that so far as the passengers were concerned, nothing had happened in the night. They were still laughing, playing, flirting, enjoying themselves as passengers on a luxury liner will.

But I glanced through the observation panel and saw that the comet, which twelve hours before had been but a dot, was now a blazing orb. And when I visited the radio turret I learned from Sparks that our period of grace had been computed. Ten days! Ten days before the comet should sweep the skirts of Sol, raising the flaming tides that spelled death to Earth and its sister planets. . . .

It was that afternoon that Lucky Logan came again to Captain Burke with a suggestion. Burke was in no mood to hear him, but Logan's sheer persistence won him an audience.

"Make it short, though!" warned the skipper. "And I warn you, I want no crazy plans such as that you suggested last night. I have troubles enough—"

"No, sir," said Logan mildly. "This is something entirely different, sir. It's about the passengers. They don't know about the comet, sir, but they're sort of nervous. Maybe they feel there's something wrong from the way we've been acting. I thought perhaps some form of entertainment might quiet them, sir."

Burke pursed his lips, then nodded slowly. "Well, I don't see anything wrong with that. Matter of fact, it's not a bad idea. What form of entertainment did you have in mind, Lieutenant? A dance—"

Logan said politely, "That would be very nice, sir. But what I *really* had in mind was something a little more unusual. Everyone is interested in mesmerism. And it so happens that I have a—er—trifling skill at the art of hypnotism. I thought it might amuse our guests to watch an exhibition—"

"Very good!" grunted the Old Man. "Like to see that myself. But you'll need a subject—"

Logan said, "Yes, sir. I was going to ask Jimmy to act as my subject—"

I yelped, "Who, me? Oh, no! Leave me out of this! I've got enough worries, without—"

Cap Burke frowned me into silence.

"That will do, Lincoln. I heartily approve of Lt. Logan's plan. Lord knows this may be the last entertainment any of us get for a long while. You will act as his subject. That is not a request; it is a command."

Lucky said, "Thank you, sir. And —er—I believe you expressed some interest in watching the exhibition? If I might make the suggestion, sir, you might watch it through the audio-visiplate. And whatever others are on duty might also be advised of the hour—"

"I'll do that," approved Burke. "We'll make it for eight o'clock, Solar Constant Time, O.Q.?"

And so it was decided. And of course I was the victim. As if *that* were unusual!

THUS it was that a few minutes after eight o'clock Lt. Christopher Logan and I were standing on the platform of the main ballroom in the *Sirius* before the assembled guests and officers of the ship. The audio-visiplates were turned on, and our little act was being watched not only by those before us, but by Capt. Burke and Lt. Ballard on the bridge, by a crew of wipers in the boiler room, by Slops in the pantry, a storeroom guard—oh, everyone on or off duty.

Logan had made a few introductory remarks concerning hypnotism, sketching in a brief history of it from its early discovery as "mesmerism" or animal magnetism up to its acknowledgement as a true force in the latter part of the 21st Century, and now the main event was to begin.

"Mr. Lincoln," Logan concluded, "will be beguiled into seeing things that do not exist, performing operations that he is normally incapable of performing, hearing sounds that are inaudible to our ears. In short, while under the influence of the hypnotic spell, he will live in a world all his own; a world in which we do not exist, or, if we do, we will exist only in some distorted version of his own mind.

"Now, Jimmy—"

I sighed and faced him. His fine gray eyes were friendly, but there was a compulsion in them I had never before noticed. He rearranged our positions so that he could face me and at the same time face both the audio and the men and women of his audience. Then he began to speak in a firm, low tone. His words were strangely soothing and gentle.

"There is quiet falling over this room," he intoned, "and in that quiet is the peace and forgetfulness of sleep. You are becoming drowsy . . . drowsy . . . drowsier by the moment. A great weight is upon your eyelids . . . you want to sleep. . . ."

Oh, yeah? I stared at him amazedly. I had never felt more wide awake in my life.

"The soft fingers of sleep close down upon you," he continued. There were little beads of sweat on his forehead, now; his eyes were grave and intent with concentration. "You will forget the toil, the trials, the troubles of the world, and relax completely. Let sleep claim your mind, let gentle slumber overwhelm you. Sleep . . . sleep . . . sleep. . . ."

This was getting whackier by the moment! Sleepy! Me? Why, hell's booming gongs, I had no more desire to go to sleep than a hungry cat in an aviary. I wet my lips and gave him the high-sign out of the corner of my mouth.

"Ixnay, alpay!" I whispered. "It ain't orkingway!"

But he paid absolutely no attention to my pig Latin. His eyes were gray clouds of strain, now; the perspiration was staining his cheeks and throat as he bent forward, looking not *at* me but over my shoulder and his voice which has been low and soothing, was raised now in sharp, ringing command.

"Sleep! You will all sleep till I bid you awaken!"

That was the last straw. I shook myself and stepped forward, grinning. I said, "Sorry, pal, but it's no go. I'm afraid you'd better pick yourself a new subject."

Then Lucky Logan relaxed, took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his brow. And a broad smile came to his lips. He said, "New subject, Jimmy? I've got plenty of subjects. Take a look, friend—"

I turned, following the wave of his hand. And when I turned, I yelled my shock out loud. *Every single soul who*

had been watching the exhibition was fast asleep!

GET that straight! I don't mean some of 'em. *All* of them! The passengers, the crewsmen—even those who'd been watching through the visiplates. I glimpsed Cap Burke in the control turret, his head had fallen forward onto his arms and his eyes, wide open, were vacant pools. The black gang down in the engine room were slumbering like contented cats. The cook was snoozing in his galley. It was—

"M-mass hypnosis!" I gasped. "You gave 'em all the works at once!"

"Right!" acknowledged Lucky grinning. "All but you, pal. I needed someone to help me, and I figured you had as much good all-around commonsense as any of 'em. We've got plenty of work to do. Come on, let's get started!"

I edged away from him cautiously. "Now, wait a minute," I said, "if this is some plan of mutiny—"

"Don't be a damned fool!" he snapped. "This is the only salvation for ourselves and our world. The Old Man was too stubborn to listen to me last night, so I had to cook up some scheme to try out my ideas.

"Now, look—those folks are going to stay asleep for the next couple of hours. We've got to work fast. Where is that velocity intensifier unit McMurtrie was talking about?"

"In—in the storeroom."

"Well, get it for me. I've read about it. I think I can make it work." A frown creased his forehead. "I hope I can make it work," he gritted. "Because it's our last chance!"

So we got busy. And he made it work. It wasn't any breeze, because the V-I unit was based on an entirely radical system of atomic transformations than any machine either of us had ever seen before. But Lucky Logan had gray matter behind that Adonis phiz of his. He puzzled over it for a while, then said, "O. Q. This wire goes here, that shunt ties in there . . . we connect this . . . and this . . ."

I said, "Maybe if we move some of these Sleeping Beauties out of the way we can work easier, hey, Lucky?"

He stopped me. "No! Don't touch them, Jimmy! We mustn't ever let them know what happened. You and I are the only ones in the universe who will ever know the truth."

"And unless you give out," I complained, "you'll be the only one. What *are* we doing?"

HE FINISHED tying in the last coil of wire, lifted, stared at me soberly. "We're going out to deflect that comet, Jimmy," he said. "We're going out into space to meet it—at a speed greater than that of light!"

"What?" I yelled. "Us—in this little band-box of a spaceship? Going out to deflect— You're crazy!"

"Maybe," said Lucky Logan softly. "But I've got a hunch it will work, Jimmy. You see, size doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is *mass*.

"You studied Einstein's general theory in college, didn't you? And you know the Lorenz mass-energy transformations? Mass increases as speed approaches the velocity of light, until at light-velocity mass is infinite. And mass has tremendous gravitational influence, attractive power.

"Therefore, if we can approach anywhere near that comet and stabilize our speed at 186,000 miles per second, the *Sirius* will be an object of infinite mass. Its force will divert the comet from its trajectory -and the measure of its deviation will save the Solar Sys-

tem!"

It was at that moment I knew he was right. And it was at that moment, too, I realized something else. I was in the presence not of the luckiest man alive, nor the whackiest, but of *genius!*

I said soberly, "How long, Mr. Logan? How long will it take us to get out there and do our stuff?"

"Not very long. Because we'll be travelling at the rate of approximately five hundred million miles per hour—"

I gulped. "W-we will?"

And he smiled. "No, we already are! I cut in the V-I unit five minutes ago!"

I SUPPOSE I should tell you how it feels to travel that fast. Well, I can't because it simply didn't feel a bit different. That was, Logan explained to me, because we were a "closed universe" in ourself. Time and matter and speed being purely relative, it didn't matter a particle to us how fast we were travelling; things looked just the same. Though we would have been, Logan said, completely invisible to an outside observer. "We contract" he explained, "along the line of our flight in geometric ratio to our increased speed. At the speed of light we have zero dimensions and infinite mass. We are already warping the space through which we travel. By my calculations, we need only get within three billion miles of the comet to disturb it sufficiently to turn it completely off its course."

"Three billion, you said?"

"That's right."

Well, that was a break for our side. I had feared we were what you might call a sort of "suicide expedition." That we would have to destroy ourselves by approaching the comet closely enough to divert it. I sighed and said, "When do we know we've done the trick?"

"By watching. Look through the visilens, Jimmy. You'll notice that space doesn't look the same as you're accustomed to seeing it. Instead of it being made up of black background and white dots which are the stars, it is a crazy quilt of flickering gray, crossed and crisscrossed with lines of lights.

"Those lines are the stars, viewed at our frightful speed. You see that one broad yellow line? Well, that's the comet. Watch that closely. When you see it 'break' suddenly and seem to veer off away from us, our task is done."

"Away from us? But it should be toward us. If we attract it."

"No," said Lucky, "because I'll be watching, too. And the moment I see the line shift, I'll throw the ship in a Loernberger loop, returning to our former course. Thus the stars will be running away from us, and the comet's path will seem to break the other way."

And it was just as he had said. For a little more than an hour (the comet had been deeper in space than we had imagined) we sat there at the controls, grimly watching that yellow line move smoothly on in a straight direction. Then, suddenly, it gave a little wriggle.

I yelled. But even as I yelled, Logan was tugging on the control levers, the *Sirius* pulled around with a jerk, and we were flashing back toward our own little sector of familiar space.

And it was then that Lucky Logan rose with a sigh of relief.

"It worked, Jimmy. Earth is saved. And now, let's get this mess cleaned up."

"Cleaned up?" I yammered. "You mean you're not going to leave the V-I unit connected?"

"For a little while, yes. But I've got some other things to do—"

And he disappeared.

AFTER a while I got curious. I switched on the visiplates until I caught sight of him. He was in the ballroom, bending over one of the passengers, apparently whispering something into the sleeping man's ear. As I watched, he moved on to the next person . . . then the next.

Then he returned, and I confronted him indignantly.

"What's the big idea, pal? Secrets, hey? What were you whispering to those people? I saw you. You even visited the bridge and told bedtime stories to the Old Man—"

Lucky shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Jimmy, but that's the one thing I can't tell you. Anything else, yes. But that's one little secret you must always allow me to keep. And now, we're approaching our regular Mars-Earth quadrant. So if you'll help me detach the V-I unit—"

I did. And when it was finished, so accurate had been his calculations that the *Sirius* was sailing through the exact sector in space it would have been at had not we taken our wild flight to the comet. And Lucky said, "O.Q., Jimmy, our little game is over. Let's go back to the ballroom."

We went back. And we stood once more on the dais. And Lucky leaned forward suddenly, passed a hand across my eyes, and I swear that for a moment everything went dizzying black. There were great bells gonging in my ears . . . the bell sounds faded, and I heard a voice calling:

"Waken! Waken from your slumbers, Jimmy Lincoln!"

AND I opened my eyes to hear riotous laughter ringing in my ears! I stared about me, dumbfounded. Everyone in the ballroom was on his feet, laughing—at me! Several of the passengers were running up to the platform, were patting Lucky on the back, saying, "Congratulations, Lieutenant! Excellent performance . . . excellent!"

I looked into the visiplate. Captain Burke's face was wreathed in grins. He said, "How do you feel, Jimmy, all right? Nice exhibition, Logan." And he blanked out.

And Sanderson and Randolph were at my side. Tommy was doubled over with mirth. "Boy, I thought I'd die at you, Jimmy!" he chortled. "You really were a caution! Tell me, how did it feel to be hypnotized? When you let on you were a big game hunter chasing elephants with a pea-shooter—"

"What I liked best was when he thought he was a lady fisherman," chuckled Joe, "baiting his hook with a worm. Pretty good, Lucky, old boy! You really had him under control!"

I stared at them wildly.

"Had *me* under control!" I yelled. "Why, I was the only one aboard the ship who was awake! Every darned one of you was as dopey as a—"

But that only made the laugh the louder. I thought Sanderson was going to fall right out of his boots. "Listen to him! He thinks *we* were asleep and he was awake! Oh, what a party! Oooh—" Then his face sobered. "If only this—this other thing weren't hanging over our heads—" he said.

I realized suddenly I could still convince them! I knew one thing they didn't.

"If you mean about the comet," I bawled, "it might interest you guys to know that—"

But I was not destined to finish my proof. For at that moment the visiplate flashed on, and a happy Cap Burke beamed down upon us all. "Ladies and gentlemen," he cried in a tri-

umphant voice, "I am happy to report to you that a peril which threatened all our lives and homes has been successfully averted.

"A tremendous comet, information concerning which was withheld from you in order not to occasion undue alarm, caused great fear throughout the Solar System. But I have just now received a radiogram from Lunar III advising me that one hour ago the cosmic visitor mysteriously changed its course, swept toward outer space, and is fast disappearing. Observers are of the opinion that its course was deflected by some hithertofore unsuspected dark body, search for which will be made."

I groaned. With that statement went my last chance of ever proving that they—not I—had slumbered through the wildest experience any man had ever known.

And do you know what one damned fool said? One of the fat, foolish passengers? He yawned and said, "Listen to that! Isn't that just like a professional spaceman! Always trying to pretend their job is more hazardous than anyone else's. . . ."

AFTERWARD, I got Lucky Logan alone in his cabin. I didn't mince words. I said, "O.Q., pal, thanks for the buggyride. You certainly made me look like a Grade A dope. Next time you want a sucker, please get somebody else to do your dirty work for you. I don't mind saving a few universes before breakfast—just to keep my hand in, you know—but it's not my idea of appreciation to have everybody think I'm the world's prize nitwit when I do it."

He said, "I'm sorry, Jimmy."

"Sure, you're sorry. So what? So the hell with *you*, Mr. Logan. You had me buncoed. I don't know what to believe, now. For a while I thought you and I had saved Earth, while everyone else slept. Then I wake up to find I was the Snow White and the universe was saved by a dark star—hell, I can't even trust the evidence of my own memories. Because maybe we never used the V-I unit, maybe we never made a wild flight into outer space, maybe it was all one of the hypnotic dreams you forced on me. Which was it? Am I right, are they? Was it a dream or—"

He said, "I'm sorry, Jimmy, but I—I can't tell."

"You mean you *won't* tell?"

His eyes were gray and calm as he lifted them to me. Surface-calm, that is. But behind their shadowy depths there was a sort of desperation.

"*Can't* tell, Jimmy. Don't you see that if it were ever to become public knowledge that I—"

And he stopped abruptly.

But this was the second time that Christopher Logan had almost spilled the beans to me. And maybe I am a little slow on the uptake, but I'm not ripe for the Paper Doll Class yet. This time I put two and two together. And got something more than four. I stared at him. And then, slowly:

"I think I'm beginning to understand, pal," I said. "So you're 'Lucky' Logan, hey? You get 'hunches,' and those hunches are always better and more accurate than anybody else gets. You never lose at games of chance . . . you seem to almost be able to read minds . . . you 'guessed' the secret of faster-than-light radio transmission and without previous instruction were able to put together a velocity intensifier unit you had never seen. You saved a ship, once, by disobediently shifting it off its course. . . ."

"What do you mean, Jimmy?" he demanded nervously.

"You know damn right well what I mean, Lucky Logan!" I said. "Let's

suppose, just for the hell of it, that your father was a smarter man than anyone gave him credit for being. Let's suppose that he took his infant son off into the wilds and fed him a special diet, trained him in special ways, and educated him along certain lines known only to himself—"

"Leave my dad out of this!" he said.

"Oh, no! Because he's very much in it, my friend! Let's further suppose that the old man did do exactly what he aimed to. He created a new type of superhuman. A sample of the 'superman' to come. A man with tremendous extra-sensory abilities that would enable him to unerringly guess the fall of cards, dice, any gambling device. A man with great mechanical ability, strong physique . . .

"That's *you,* Logan! You are a superman! But you're afraid to reveal it to the outside world. Maybe because Man looks with suspicion upon any life form more intelligent than himself. Maybe because that examination in your childhood was such an embarrassing, terrifying experience to a sensitive person. But *I* know! You're more than a plain man. You're a superman. That's the secret you conceal behind a wisecracking exterior. Now, isn't it?"

But Lucky Logan had completely regained control of himself. The tortured look had left his eyes, and there was the ghost of a smile on his lips. A smile in which — perhaps mistakenly — I thought I could read a subtle meaning. Maybe I was completely wrong, and he was laughing at me. Or—maybe I was right. And he was happy that in all the world, at least, *one* person understood him. And he was less lonely.

Anyhow:

"Is it?" he laughed. "Why, I wouldn't know, Jimmy. Say, how about a drink?"

And that's all I could get out of him. Except the drink. I had three of those . . .

(The End)

The Observatory

(Concluded from page 8)

least you ought to catch the errors in your subheads. In your March issue, Mussolini is spelled Moussolini." Mr. Rollins, that is not a typographical error; that is just how we feel about the whole thing. If the Duce isn't a mouse, what is he?

SOMETIMES we wonder how we ever get any coherent thought into these Observatory notes, or do we? Just as a fair example of what we mean, we'll describe the past few minutes:

Mr. Herman R. Bollin, who is a crackerjack art director and an aviation artist par excellence, comes rushing in with a simple request: "Quick, an idea for a front and back cover for AMAZING STORIES Quarterly for Summer, 1943!"

Obviously Mr. Bollin knows, as do the readers, that I have nothing at all to do We appreciate his concern for our boredom. We dash out a few ideas for him. Rushing into his office to give them to him, he informs us: "Oh, that! I just got a couple of your ideas of 1939 okayed for those covers."

"Well," say we, nothing daunted, "tuck these new ideas away in your 1944 file for okay in 1943, from our 1942 ideas."

WE arrive there to find eight authors, four artists, seven fans, and no beautiful girls waiting for us, on some business or other. The authors want: (a) To know why we turned down their story? (b) We seriously destroyed their last story by placing a comma after peach when it should have been after pear. (b) Oh, just looking around your new offices. (d) I am suing you for plagiarism. (e) When is the next issue coming out? All this business relegated to its limbo, we return to our column. And what do we find? That all our ideas have fled, and we have to write tripe like this. But maybe you'd like the inside story at that? Well, there it is!

P.S. Don't forget to get your copy of *Fantastic Adventures* this month. It's a special giant issue —244 pages, cover to cover!

WHICH brings us to the Observatory's end for this month. We'll be back next month, and with plenty of great stories, not the least of which will be "Lord of the Crystal Bow" by David Wright O'Brien, and the advent of the famous Mac Girl to *Amazing Stories.* And that in itself is enough to make sure you'll be with us!—*Rap.*

« ABOUT BEETLES »

By JACK WEST

An amazing creature is the lowly beetle. Here are some facts about him you may not have known. Some amazing facts indeed!

BECAUSE he is such a small and insignificant looking insect, the beetle has often been forgotten in the chronicles of insect lore. But consider the facts: Beetles constitute nearly half of all known insect species; there are between three and four hundred thousand different kinds of beetles gallivanting around this earth of ours; they make their homes where you'd expect any good beetle to live—under treebark, stones, in the burrows of rodents such as the kangaroo rat and the pocket gopher and sometimes he'll be the roommate of the Florida land turtle.

As well known and as prevalent as the beetle is, comparatively little is known of his habits. One beetle family called the Histeridae group, or more commonly nick-named hister beetles or histerids, are perhaps the strangest of all beetles. This beetle is supposedly named after the Latin word *histrio,* meaning actor, because of this insect's strange habit of playing dead when disturbed. Scientists have been paying a good deal of attention to this beetle of late because of its strange appetite for other more destructive insects. The hister beetle lives on decaying animal and vegetable matter and under bark, where he feeds on the larvae of flies and other insects.

Scientists have long sought an insect to fight insects. Take, for instance, the termite, that devilish little wood borer and building crumpler. Well, there is a breed of hister beetle that likes nothing better than to make a meal of about fifty termites about four times a day. This battling beetle is a real smoothie. He actually makes his home in the termite's headquarters, and while he is eating up his hosts one by one they eagerly seek his company. The reason for this is the hister beetle emits a strange glandular fluid which dopes the termites in such a way that they go for the fluid with the same eagerness that a dope addict craves a shot of cocaine or a sniff of "snow."

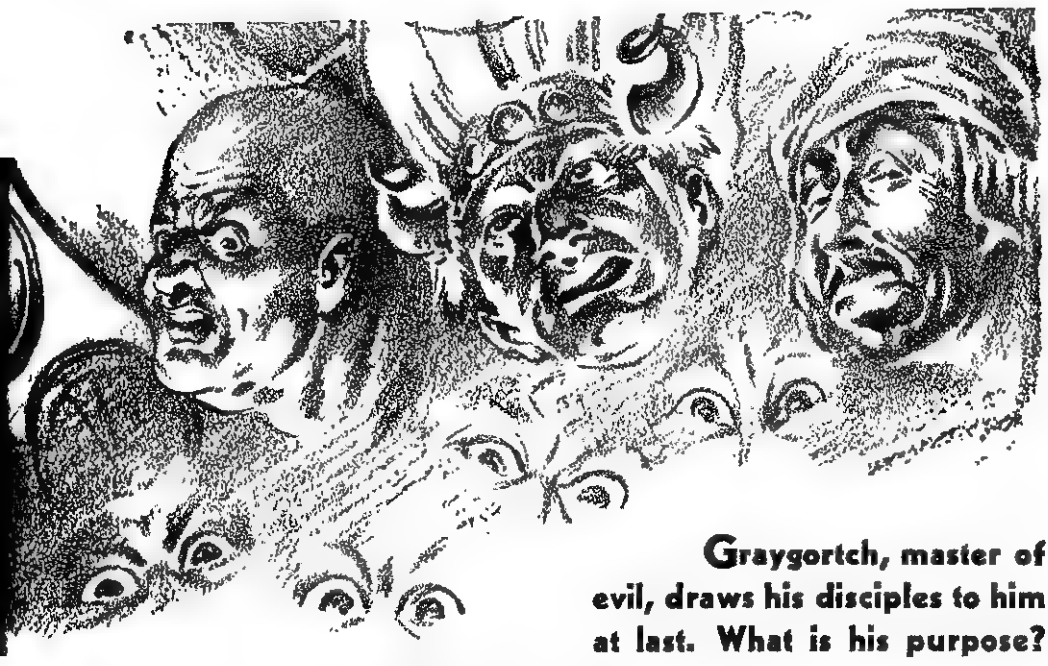
Speculation on this strange power has led some scientists to believe that this fluid may have the power to make humans more docile and acceptable to each other. Experts hope soon to be able to experiment with this fluid. Can it be used to make prisoners of war more willing to confinement after their capture? Can it be used to subdue incorrigible criminals? What bizarre results will come from this strange little insect that has been prowling around underfoot for so many years unnoticed in a world of advanced technological progress?

DISCIPLES O

Visions of all the evil men of the world floated closer and closer

DESTINY

BY DON WILCOX



Graygortch, master of evil, draws his disciples to him at last. What is his purpose?

THE jaws of the trapdoor swung halfway open—*and stuck there.* Ross Bradford, half falling fought to catch himself. His outthrust arms cracked down on the solid floor, for an instant his body dangled, then he swung himself up over the edge.

"Who snapped the juice off?" Jag Rouse, the big captain, bawled, jerking his head around as if to bite somebody. His bandaged arm was a white flash in the dimmed lights. At the same instant the trapdoor had caught, the decorative wall lights had gone out.

The irate captain flung a broadside of orders. "Tie that bird up! Go see about the lights! Find out who pulled the switch and send him in! Do something, somebody! *Watch him, there! Look out!*"

There was a wild scramble just beyond the trapdoor. A pudgy guard with a squint of inspiration had taken it upon himself to complete the job which the ailing trap had bungled. He flung himself at Ross Bradford, in the manner of a football player, intending to bump his victim into the half-open square.

It was an almost fatal mistake for the pudgy guard. His onrush was too low, Ross hurdled him, and the guard staggered off-balance toward the gaping trap.

Three other sailor-suited guards rushed forward to try to stop him.

But Ross didn't stop to analyze their motives. He knew he hadn't escaped the trap, he had just postponed it. Nothing short of a free-for-all fight with some lucky breaks could pull him out of this jam, he thought. And here the sailors came plunging at him—

He swung his fists, struck the first two assailants with the clack of a hammer smashing skeletons. The two went down in a heap, but others came on to swamp him.

Then it was a mighty dog pile, right

on the ragged edge of empty space, for the gaping square in the floor looked straight down a full five hundred and fifty feet to the dizzy ocean. The wide overhanging porch trembled with the thump of tumbling fighters, the uproar of sailors' voices.

The clamor lasted scarcely a minute before it came to a sudden deadlock with the victim somewhere near the bottom of the pile.

Captain Rouse's ugly bellow thundered out over the muttering and gasping and punching of fists.

"Clear out of there, you hyenas! Get away from that trapdoor. I told you to tie him. Get up—"

The captain's bellow choked off. His eyebrows jumped. As the dog-pile untangled itself, there was Bradford at the bottom of it, his arms hanging over the floor's edge, clutching the wrists of a sailor who had almost taken the grand slip. The sailor was all out of sight but his blood-red fingers.

"Better give us a hand, here," said Ross Bradford, "or you'll lose another buddy."

"Give him a hand."

IT WAS not Rouse who spoke the command. It was the deep sonorous voice of Graygortch himself, standing like an ancient statue in the corner door-

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Synopsis of Part I

Flying under a starry sky to deliver a bomber to the British, ROSS BRADFORD, volunteer American pilot, and his writer friend, HANK SWITCHER, were disturbed by a strange radio warning of a midnight storm over the Flinfiord island. The girl's ominous words, "Storm . . . Danger," were followed by vast flashes of light stabbing out from a castle above the island promontory. The deadly rays caught the tail of the bomber, disintegrated it instantly. The bomber crashed down through a terrific storm, the two men barely escaped with their lives. Ross swore he would get to the bottom of this destructive phenomenon.

Hiking up to the castle, Ross encountered the brutal guards or "sailors." One of them, SCHUBERT, welcomed Ross into the castle as a candidate for marriage to VIVIAN, the pretty spitfire niece of old BILL GRAYGORTCH, master of the castle. Ross disclaimed any such purpose, but he was charmed by this spirited girl who was putting up a valiant scrap against the castle's hotbed of dangers. It was she who secretly broadcast the warnings whenever her aged uncle climbed the tower to unleash the mysterious storms and earthquakes. Occurring off and on for the past nine years, these storms were becoming increasingly violent in recent weeks.

Ross was at once embroiled in the castle's dangers. He was warned that Captain JAG ROUSE, in charge of the "sailors," would make short work of him; for Rouse, plotting to marry Vivian, had grown suspicious of the slippery Schubert's intrigue to bring in candidates from the outside. Ross Bradford was forced to hide out.

By this time Ross realized that the castle storms represented something more deadly than a Nazi war instrument over a small patch of ocean. There was evidence that men of evil from all parts of the earth were strangely attracted to this place. The "sailors" were criminals drawn from everywhere; so were the dwellers of the eastern village of the island—men of evil who had failed to get through the castle gates. Indeed, Vivian insisted that Ross Bradford, too, must be a villainous person at heart, otherwise he would not have come here in answer to this strange power which no one but Graygortch himself understood.

Nevertheless, Vivian gave Ross the benefit of the doubt and helped him to hide. Captain Rouse's pursuit grew hot. Ross escaped to the roof. He discovered that the smart crippled JIMPSON, who had miraculously survived the five-hundred foot death-fall from the trapdoor of the overhanging porch, made daily climbs by his secret passage up the promontory wall to receive food from FANTELLA, the cook. Ross and Jimpson exchanged messages; by a drop cord, Jimpson sent ropes up to Ross, Ross sent wire and some tools down to the cripple. Then Ross started for the tower that held the storm mysteries.

Meanwhile Hank Switcher, who stayed at the fishermen's village, met SUSAN SMITH, a snappy American news correspondent, who had followed HINKO, a Japanese Hara-Kiri

way. All eyes turned on the aged mystery man for a startled moment. Ross almost lost his grip on the sailor's wrists.

But the obedience to Graygortch's command was immediate. The pudgy sailor who had opened the attack was hauled up, pale and breathless, from the hole in the floor.

"Close the trap," said Graygortch quietly.

"Yes, close the trap, close the trap," Rouse barked, as if that were the very thing he'd been trying to get done all along. But the electricity was off, and the trap wouldn't close. However, Schubert came to the rescue by rolling a table across the floor and inverting it over the danger spot.

Everyone breathed easier, and the sailor who had so narrowly missed death gazed at Ross with a puzzled expression, whispered, "This doesn't make sense, pal. I tried to bump you off. I overreached myself and was on the skids when my fingertips caught me. Then you broke off a fist fight to save me. And you're the culprit that's booked for death. It doesn't make sense—not around this joint."

No one spoke aloud. For Graygortch was still standing like an ancient carving of marble in the doorway. Everyone was waiting for him to speak.

"I saw what happened," said the old,

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promoter to this island, whence he had been drawn by the mysterious, urge.

Hank and Sue followed the Japanese to the castle. In a fracas at the gate Hank shot and killed a "sailor"—much to his regret. Hinko fled. Sue was left outside the castle gate. But Hank was chased by the sailors and was in danger of being clubbed to death when Ross, perched on the porch roof, rescued him with a rope. The two men managed to throw off their pursuers and gain temporary safety in the top of the great storm tower. While Hank moaned over his killing, Ross caught sight of the huge circular metallic instrument that filled the whole circumference of the tower like a vast horizontal wheel.

A moment later Hank accidentally stepped on the top landing of the tower stairs, which caused the highest of eight loud gongs to ring out. At once Rouse and his sailors knew where the two men were hiding.

Machine guns on the roof forced Ross and Hank to risk descent by a rope within the blackness of the tower's velvet draperies. Rouse was frustrated in his attempt to take the two men singlehanded, but they yielded to the inevitable capture and were bound hand and foot. Rouse, angry over bungling the job and receiving some broken bones in the bargain, announced a trapdoor disciplinary ceremony for the following morning.

Rouse was in the mood to dish out cruelty liberally. He hoped to be made the thirteenth disciple of Graygortch. He wanted to enter into that mysterious realm of evil through which this feeble old man somehow caused Hitler and his war gods and other lords of the earth's evils to blend and merge their diabolical spirits.

That night Fantella, the good-hearted old German cook, brought Ross word that Vivian meant to take his advice and run away from this place.

Later in the night Ross and Hank got their first look at the legendary Graygortch himself. The feeble old man, walking in his sleep, entered his living room, asked for his old friend DR. ZIMMERMAN, who used to play checkers with him. "One more game before I die." To Ross, old Bill Graygortch looked gentle and harmless.

Dr. Zimmerman, of course, did not appear, for he had said goodby to this castle nine years ago.

After a few minutes of waiting, the old man suddenly changed to his hard, cruel nature—the mysterious Graygortch that everyone feared—and tottered back to bed.

The following morning Captain Rouse conducted the trapdoor disciplinary ceremony. He forced Schubert, suspected of traitorous behavior, to press the switch that operated the trap in the floor of the overhanging porch five hundred feet above the sea.

Hank Switcher was marched across the floor, halted over the trap. Rouse pronounced judgment, Schubert pressed the switch, Hank fell through.

Then came Ross Bradford's turn. He was forced to walk the line, was halted on the fatal spot. Rouse barked the fatal order to Schubert, who obediently pressed the switch.

old man in his low dry-throated rumble. "You . . . I want to talk with you."

His arm lifted slowly, seeming to creak audibly; the fingers pointed toward Ross Bradford.

"You . . . come with me."

Graygortch's arm slid part way down to his side, but turned with a slow sweeping stroke that referred to Schubert and three other guards nearby. "You four . . . accompany him . . . with *respect.*"

Ross marched forward, Schubert and the other three sailors fell in beside him like a military escort.

"Conduct him to my study," said Graygortch, turning to follow.

Captain Jag Rouse scratched his head perplexedly, then blurted, "Graygortch, your honor—what's the big idea? It's *my* job to execute him, not yours. I was all set to do it, but the damned electricity went off—"

"Don't apologize," said Graygortch hoarsely. "I need this man."

"Huh?"

The big captain was so dumbfounded by this remark that he forgot all about his broken forearm and sprained shoulder, not to mention the bundle of pains in his side. He strode across toward Graygortch in great agitation.

"Lemme get this straight. You told me the other day to put some teeth in the discipline, didn't you? You told me your thirteenth disciple hadn't been chosen yet, and if I wanted to qualify—"

"Rouse! Hold your tongue."

The old master's snarl was hint enough; but the burly captain was tangled in his own mental underbrush. He stammered.

"Dammit, what'd you want me to do when the trapdoor stuck? Shoot him? Hell, I'd have done it in a minute, but I—"

"*Rouse!*" The angry rumble made the walls vibrate. "Lucky for you you didn't. Lucky for you that my niece switched off his death in time. *I need this man.*"

Jag Rouse stood glaring, red-faced, breathing humiliation and confusion.

"Stay where you are," Graygortch's parting words crackled. "I will take care of you soon."

CHAPTER XVI

DURING the ten minutes that followed his exit from the overhanging porch, Ross Bradford endured the swiftest whirl of thoughts of a lifetime. His brain was like a photomontage movie, crowded with action scenes that raced and collided and tumbled over each other. Out of the blur he snatched for wisps of ideas.

Hank had gone down. Would there be a chance to rescue his body? What was in the air now? Was Ross himself on the way to a crueller execution than the one he had just escaped? Was this master-demon, Graygortch, taking over because Captain Jag Rouse had failed?

Echoes of the captain's bitter growl overtook Ross as he marched away from the porch.

". . . some teeth in the discipline . . ."

"Shoot him? Hell, I'd have done it in a minute . . ."

But Ross marched on out of hearing, and Schubert and the other three guards at his side whispered expectantly as if something surprising and unprecedented were in the air.

That, too, was Ross's guess. The curious contradiction of authorities that he had sensed from the day he had entered this castle seemed due for a showdown. If that was it, he was on the right side—Schubert's.

Unless Schubert himself was operating some undercover plot more atrocious

than Captain Rouse's!

What a contrast in the way those two men worked. Jag Rouse was a bellowing warhorse, clumsy and cruel, loud and brutal. He would plow into trouble for the sake of raising a dust, expecting the master to honor him for it. Schubert, on the other hand, was as streamlined as a submarine, as silent, and as much under the surface.

Both men were working hand in glove with Graygortch. But their cross-purposes had been evident to Ross from the start.

"Here you are," said Schubert, opening the study door, "with our respects. It's like I told you that day when we guards met you at the gate and I took you in charge. The big boss has been waiting for a high-class criminal like you to come along—"

"But I'm not—" Ross checked himself. He had nothing to lose, now, and everything to gain, by playing the game *from the inside*. He would never find what lay back of those leviathan flashes of death from the castle tower until he got next to the central mystery—the mystery that was Graygortch himself. All right, he would *be* a high-class criminal—like nobody's business.

"I knew the minute I saw you," said Schubert, "that you had the stuff the big boss was looking for. Of course you tried to lie out of it, because you never knew *I knew* you'd got the mysterious call to come and marry the girl."

"You've got my number," said Ross, feeling a bounce in his blood pressure that would certainly have registered on a lie detector.

"Well, now that you've won over the captain's death trap, looks like you've got clear sailing. And don't forget me if you want someone to sing at your wedding."

Schubert whistled a strain of a wedding march through his expressionless mouthful of overhanging teeth. He fell into step with his three companions and they marched away. Ross was alone in the master's study.

SOON Graygortch arrived, closed the door behind him, sat down to face Ross across the table. The lights had come on, and the low table lamp, together with a generous stream of morning sunlight, gave the old man's face a unique brilliance, highlighting his craggy features with white gold.

"I have few words," the old man began. "My days are numbered. You have your life ahead. Tell me, did my power draw you here? Did you find yourself unable to resist coming?"

"I *could* have resisted," said Ross.

In honesty he might have added that he hadn't felt the magnetic drawing-power in the slightest. He had seen the repulsive glare of evil eyes during his fall with the bomber. But evidently Graygortch, like Schubert, believed him a man of evil, whose coming was a sympathetic response to the world-wide magnetism of the master. Ross added, "I wanted to come."

"You *wanted* to come because *I wanted you to come.*" Graygortch blinked his wrinkled eyes complacently. "You were responsive to my call. Your past, I assume, has been a dark one. Dark, as judged by your fellow men."

"Very dark," said Ross, with another throb for the lie detector.

"A few minutes ago I watched you fight."

"Yes?"

"You are seasoned to fighting. Your strength and daring wrung respect from Jag Rouse's toughest guards—even the one you might have dropped—but it was *cunning* of you to save him."

Ross nodded. The old man seemed to intend a compliment, though it was strange he should use the word "cun-

ning" instead of "decent" or "sporting."

But Graygortch's next remarks, spoken with great deliberation, were far more mystifying.

"I would have enjoyed seeing him drop. Still, you no doubt had your own purpose in saving him. *I do not always profess to understand the motives of mortal men.*"

Ross' hands, pressing hard against the edge of the table, slipped off with a jerk. He moved uneasily under the old man's penetrating glare, and shifted his attention awkwardly. He noticed his wrists, cut and clotted from the ropes that had bound them; but Graygortch went on talking.

"You have, I believe, the rare combination of abilities I have been seeking. I assume that you are accustomed to killing swiftly and cruelly."

"In my stride," said Ross. He dared not look Graygortch in the eye. But the lie had gone too far for any compromises now.

"And you came here hoping to marry my niece?"

"I understand that I am a candidate, your honor," said Ross.

"*The* candidate," said Graygortch, decisively. "You have the strength to protect her, the manliness to win and hold her love. You have the heart of a fighter, the swiftness and toughness of decision to beat off the swarms of invaders who will come to these castle gates—even as you have come—"

"Drawn by your magnetic power," Ross interpolated.

"Yes—but soon it will be my niece's power, for I will be gone."

FOR a moment Ross stopped breathing. Chills cascaded from the base of his skull down to his fingertips. The fanciful vision of this mountaintop estate left in the hands of Vivian Graygortch and himself was paralyzing.

"My niece, you see," said Graygortch, "is going to inherit my work."

Ross stammered, "Does—does she know?"

"Not yet. The first step is for her to marry. With a partner to lean upon, she will be more receptive to her coming responsibilities—or I might say, glories. As to your character, my human sources of observation have assured me—"

Ross' heart skipped a beat. There it was again—that weird implication that this tottering old man held himself remote from ordinary human beings. He must be utterly crazy.

"My human sources of observation, especially Schubert, have assured me that you—in spite of your audacity and your recklessness where your own life is concerned—are as near the answer to all requirements as we will find. I do not mean that my niece considers you a perfect marriage—"

"No?"

"But she considers you the least among the evils from which she must choose. This, of course, is a very superficial judgment."

"Of course," said Ross, bewilderedly, "if you mean—"

"That in essence you are the *most* evil, otherwise you would not be qualified. Vivian is childlike. Her eyes have not been opened to the world that I live in. She sees only the shadow of me. And of you."

"But what of Jag Rouse?" Ross asked, beginning to catch the old man's line of thought. "Does she understand him?"

"Rouse is so bluntly honest about his intentions of evil that my niece sees him for exactly what he is. Consequently she is terrified by him. He has thus eliminated himself as a possible husband for her."

Ross gulped. This line of reasoning

was a tortuous one; strangely, it was complicated by a lack of normal human insights. Anyone should know that a young girl like Vivian would not be attracted to an arrogant, boastful beast of a man like Rouse. But that was the angle that this old man missed. He seemed only to weigh abstract evil against abstract good. And it was only the evil that he prized.

"You," Graygortch continued, "not only possess potentialities for greater evil than Rouse. You also possess the cleverness to conceal your boundless wickedness by an innocent manner. So you are our man. You have the power to win Vivian over while she is still innocent of what is before her."

"I have the power to win her," Ross echoed.

"After her eyes have been opened, and she sees my world for what it is, then she will also know you for what you are, and she will respect you in a new light. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Ross nodded, touching his fingers to his sweat-streaming forehead.

"TIME is growing very short," said the old man. "I have had to give you these confidences briefly, almost before we are acquainted. In a few days I shall die."

"Will there be any more storms?" Ross asked anxiously.

"Not many, I hope. I am trying to bring all of my thirteen disciples into a single focus—a single mind that will serve as a storehouse and boiling pot for the earth's high lords of evil who commune with me—*my disciples of death*. Do you follow?"

"I think so," said Ross, narrowing his eyes. "This mind that the disciples enter will be a place for them to share their power—"

"Exactly. Each will reinforce the other, like cells of a battery. All these years I have labored to bring them closer together. It has been a superhuman task. But in recent storms I have almost achieved it, in spite of difficulties."

Graygortch closed his eyes in heavy reminiscence. His stiff old fingers pressed hard against his wrinkled forehead.

Was this insanity? Was it simply a mass of highly organized delusions? Ross Bradford tried to weigh every word. He hoped the old man would say more, for at last the talk had come close to the very heart of the old man's mysterious workings.

"Among my disciples," Graygortch went on, "are a few war leaders in Germany who are so preoccupied that they unwittingly resist my drawing power. If Hitler and a few others only knew how much more fully their potentialities could be realized if they would yield a little farther to my call—"

"Hitler?"

Ross echoed the name blankly. The breath was gone out of him. He felt dreadfully sick, fainty. "Then your disciples are enlisted from—"

"Anywhere on earth—even as far away as the land of the rising sun. I have limited myself to thirteen because I know that the earth's most evil thirteen men, if I bring them together, are enough to plunge the whole earth into . . . my kind of world."

Ross' trembling hands slipped to his knees. These words were firebrands shooting through his brain. He could scarcely trust himself to speak.

"Once I have succeeded in bringing all of them in *fully*," Graygortch said, "I shall be able to *transfer* the focus to my niece, Vivian. Then I shall die —happily."

Ross felt the force of Graygortch's eyes on him, like an electric pressure

crowding him against a barbed net. Crowding him to see whether he would pass through, or catch.

Ross tried to breathe. The room was hot and unbearably stuffy. He wanted to get out, to run away, to shake off these hideous words, to bathe his steaming face in cool water—

Cool water! That's where Hank's body was—somewhere in the chill ocean. Maybe it had washed up on the rocks, maybe it had sunk. Probably the latter. Ross thought of the crippled hermit, Jimpson, who kept statistics, counting the bodies that sailed down from this castle and crushed into the water. He wondered if Jimpson had seen Hank fall?

ROSS looked up. That stare was still pressing him. He tried to meet it. A knock at the door saved him.

Fantella entered, talking boisterously.

"Mine goodnuts, vy don't you got a vindow open? It's hot in here like der uffen. Vat iss you men cooking up—a private hell?"

She clattered across the room and flung a window open.

"Dare. Dot breeze makes you veel better already. Lucky for a man ven he got a voman to take care uff him."

She deftly slipped a note under Ross' hand as she blustered out. Ross moved his hand unobtrusively toward his pocket. The note would have to wait.

"And now a word about your immediate duties," said Graygortch, quite oblivious to the cook's intrusion. "You will proceed without delay along three lines of action. First, you shall take charge of the guards as soon as I have dismissed Captain Rouse. He is through. He will leave today."

"I—the *captain* of those—"

"Choose your own title. The important thing is to maintain a well-disciplined body of sailors so you can defend the castle against any party of trespassers. Use whatever disciplinary measure you wish, to keep order. The trapdoor is at your service when you want it."

"Yes, your honor."

"Secondly, you will accompany me to the tower for my meetings with my disciples. Very soon I will hold one of these storms to give you a glimpse from the inside."

"Yes, your honor."

"Thirdly, you must arrange for a marriage with Vivian. There. That is all. Mind you, don't reveal what I have confided in you. But make all possible haste in completing arrangements—"

"Vivian, of course, has a mind of her own—"

"She has a mind for you, Bradford. She cut off the electricity to save you. Then she came and appealed to me to get you out of danger. That's proof enough she prefers you. Go to her at once."

"I will," Ross said. "I'll—er—propose immediately. If she turns me down—"

"She won't. I've given her a curtain lecture." The old man glanced at an antiquated time-piece on the table. "It is now high noon. If you're the man my agents have sized you up to be, you'll bring Vivian to me for a marriage ceremony by sundown this evening."

CHAPTER XVII

ROSS planted his elbows in the grimy dust of an east window and gazed across the castle grounds. He saw the party of five moving briskly out of the gate—four guards and Jag

Rouse. The ex-captain was stepping along without being prodded. He would reach the East Village before dark—*if* he didn't take it in his head to turn back.

But Ross, watching from the castle, guessed some of the bitter thoughts that plagued the ex-captain. He knew only too well that his own troubles with Jag Rouse weren't at an end . . .

* * *

As far as ex-Captain Rouse knew, during that afternoon's march, the sky was red, the trees were red, the stone bridge that crossed the tumbling headwaters of the Flinfiord river was red. And the waters, too. If ever in his life Jag Rouse had seen red, it was today.

And yet it wasn't altogether the dismissal that burned him up. Nor Graygortch's send-off, though the aged master's words had been a hard jolt. More than anything else it was the sting of losing—losing to that damned scheming trespasser, Ross Bradford.

Jag Rouse muttered to himself. This put him in a class with a stray bull that has to be driven to another herd because he's the wrong breed, or his brand has grown over, or he's been *sold*—

That was it. He'd been sold out by that goddamned Romeo who should have taken the death drop, according to the rules.

What a turn. Here this hare-brained Schubert and three other sailors were giving him the bum's rush across the mountain trails. And they were already talking about what a swell captain that new man Bradford would be, and what a fancy killer he'd been back in America, and what a handsome daredevil of a husband he'd make for Vivian, and what snappy starch he'd put into the sailors.

"Yep," said Schubert, "we're in luck to have a new chief like him, now that our old captain has decided to leave us. We'll miss you, Jag, you old turnip, but I hear the big boss promoted you to a better set-up."

"You'd be surprised," Rouse grunted.

"That's good," said Schubert. "As long as you've got that extra *discipleship* coming up—"

"Who told you?" Rouse snapped.

"So that *is* it!" Schubert chuckled. "I figured it was. A guy don't walk off and let another fellow cop his girl unless there's a better prize in the air. But that discipleship hangs pretty high in the air, I'm told. You think you can make the jump?"

Rouse snarled. "Why don't you chase yourselves back home?"

"Because our new chief told us to give you a military exit all the way to the slope. He figured you needed it. Otherwise you might not have gone beyond the gate, and you might have sneaked back—"

"I might have, at that," said Rouse, "and I'd have licked the tar out of him, in spite of an arm in a sling."

"I'm sure that's what he was afraid of," said Schubert sarcastically. "He knows you'd never resort to any knife-in-the-back methods. Oh, no, not you . . . Well, here we are. You're on your own. The next time we hear from you, maybe you'll be one of Graygortch's chosen men—the thirteenth. And don't forget the chief's advice—better take that arm to a doctor for an X-ray. An X-ray for an ex-captain!"

Rouse trudged down the long crooked trail toward the East Village muttering to himself.

"The chief," he growled at the passing stumps and stones. "They're gonna call this young upstart the chief! All right, they can call him that—while he lasts. But I know a way to make an *ex*-chief out of him—and It'll either

blow up my chances for that thirteenth niche, or clinch the deal, and I don't give a damn which." . . .

* * *

BACK at the castle Ross Bradford stood at a window gazing through field glasses. The afternoon shadows were lengthening across the mountainous island, but Ross could still follow the progress of the big-shouldered ex-captain.

"Is he still going the right direction?" asked a passing guard. It was Pudgy, the sailor that Ross had saved from the death-fall at the disciplinary ceremony.

"He's moving down the slope toward the East Village," said Ross. "Take a look."

Pudgy lifted the field glasses. "It looks to me like someone's followin' along back of him. 'Bout a quarter of a mile back."

"Good," said Ross. "That's Schubert. I ordered him to follow. Guess we can check Jag Rouse off the trouble list for the present."

Pudgy responded by batting his eyes curiously. He was probably itching to know—he and all the other sailors of the castle's guard—what the new chief's trouble-list might contain.

"Pudgy, I want you to run down to the kitchen department," said Ross, "and tell Fantella to make me a special four-three-O cake."

"A *four-three-O* cake?"

"Right. I'll drop in and pick it up this evening."

The stubby sailor memorized the figures on his fingers as he hurried down the steps. He paused on a landing to scratch his puzzled head, then hurried on.

Ross took another look at the evening shadows stretching over the castle grounds and did some counting of his own.

Of the three things Graygortch had given him to do, one had already been checked off. He had established himself as the chief of the sailors. They had accepted him with unquestionable respect. He had turned the routine of drill over to a competent lieutenant and had stiffened the hours of duty. But the game of guardsman's hockey, which had previously sent most of the would-be intruders down the mountainside with battered heads, he had vetoed. In place of that treatment, he had ordered that any and all intruders be held at the gate until the nature of their business had been reported to him, so that he could pass upon each and every comer personally.

His second and third duties, as Graygortch had outlined them, were: To assist the master in every storm ritual. To marry the master's niece by sundown today.

With a final glance at the sunset shadows he turned from the window.

REACHING his newly assigned room he spent a few minutes washing the grime from his hands and face, combing his hair, salving his sore wrists.

He keenly wished for a bath and a change of clothes. This pilot's outfit he had been wearing for several days was hardly appropriate wedding garb.

As he strode down the corridor toward Vivian's playroom he passed the entrance to the culinary department. He caught the furtive eyes of the maids watching him expectantly. They had heard, all right, and were no doubt on fire with gossip.

"Meester Bradford," Fantella shouted, bustling out into the corridor with her hands full of cookbooks. "Vat in de vorld did you mean by a vor-tree-O

cake? Dere ain't a cookbook in de house—"

"Quiet, Fantella," Ross snapped. "I'll see you later."

"Later, huh? After all der time I've vasted on you, you be lucky if your dinners ain't later vor a veek."

"Fantella, if you don't have a wedding dinner ready for Vivian and me right on the dot, I'll be tempted to wring your funny neck."

"Vedding dinner! Vedding dinner!" Fantella gasped and swallowed and looked as guilty as a child about to be spanked. "Meester Bradford—"

"Well, what is it?"

"Hafn't you read my note?" Her voice lowered to an excited whisper. "Vivian iss gone."

"Gone? Gone where?" He unfolded the note. Its simple message read: "Vivian has got away now."

"Just—*gone.*" The cook rolled her eyes innocently. "You remember vat you told her to do?"

Bradford raised his eyebrows with sudden insight. Yes, of course he remembered. He had told Vivian Graygortch she ought to run away from home. This castle had become a danger spot for anyone. It was no place for an innocent girl.

"But, Fantella," said Bradford with an exaggerated sternness that made her roll her eyes more than ever, "that was before Graygortch took me in. Now I'm chief of the guards. And I'm under orders from the master to marry Vivian tonight. So you see—everything has changed."

"Haf you changed, Meester Bradford?" she asked, eyeing him steadily.

It was a sharp question, and Bradford saw that he wasn't fooling this good-hearted old German cook one bit. She had seen right through his mask. She knew that he was faking his allegiance to old Bill Graygortch.

How much more did she know? Did she know he was on the verge of faking a marriage with Vivian just to carry on his own game?

Did she know where Vivian was?

"WE'LL leave me out of this," said Bradford. "This is a serious jam. If Vivian is gone, and you're the only one who knows where she went—"

"Who says I know vere she vent?"

"S-s-sh. Don't get so excited," Ross advised. "You and I had better come to an understanding."

The cook scowled defensively. "How could ve haf a understanding ven you order der vor-tree-O cake vot don't exist?"

"Listen, Fantella, I'll have to report Vivian's disappearance to Graygortch at once. If she's hiding here in the castle—"

"She ain't. She's gone. Maybe vun vay, maybe der oder vay. I vouldn't know."

"All right. I'll send some guards out to look for her. As chief, it's the least I can do."

"Vat's der most you could do?"

"Go find her myself."

"Vare vould you go?"

Bradford searched her secretive face. "I'd go straight to the fisherman's village," he said. "That's where she'd be most likely to go—if she meant to get passage off the island."

It was uncertain business, trying to read Fantella's expression, but Ross Bradford thought he had it. There was a faint breath of relief that was almost a safe bet. It seemed to say, Yes, go to the fisherman's village; go to the East Village too if you want to, but you won't find her.

Ross Bradford smiled and made one more gesture toward their common ground of understanding.

"Thank you, Fantella," he said, pat-

ting her on the shoulder. "I'll postpone my wedding. I'll send guards out to find Vivian, but they *won't* find her, I'm sure. And if she happens to be hiding within a stone's throw of us right this minute—"

"*Ve* von't know nothing about it," said Fantella staunchly.

"Exactly," said Ross Bradford.

With that he strode off.

He summoned a bugler who called an emergency assembly of the sailors and maids. They came on the run from all directions and fell in before him at the South Pole Plaza, beneath the great storm tower.

He paced before them, delivered the momentous news in a brief thunderbolt announcement.

"Vivian Graygortch is gone. I've made a swift investigation. I'm convinced that she has run away to avoid marriage. A thorough search will commence at once. The swiftest party will go to the fisherman's village to see that she has no chance to catch a passage off the island.

Meanwhile, I will confer with our master, the honorable Graygortch."

He assigned several groups to search different parts of the ground and all the trails leading away from it, dispatched a party to each village, and ordered the maids of superior rank to conduct a complete search of the castle itself.

When he had finished his orders, he had covered the territory so completely that a low rumbling voice of praise sounded from one side of the plaza—the voice of Graygortch.

"You have done well," came the old man's words, and everyone turned to see him standing like a gray old statue. "If my niece ran away, she was frightened. But with Bradford to lead you, you are sure to find her."

CHAPTER XVIII

BRADFORD circled around the wide porches in the darkening twilight. From inside the castle the incessant little bells were ringing, telling him that search parties were crossing hallways or turning corners, or passing up or down stairs. The effect of all these electric-eye-operated sound effects was never more weird than on this evening.

What had happened to Vivian Graygortch?

Every ringing bell seemed to ask that question. And so did every flashing electric lantern out on the castle grounds. The parties of sailors were spreading in an ever widening circle trying to catch some telltale clue under the beams of their lights.

Bradford smiled grimly. It was a strange contrast to have everything going his own way for once.

Yes, he was the boss of the hour. Not forgetting, of course, that the mystic Old Bill Graygortch was the real boss, with a magic power up his sleeve that could sink ships and disintegrate airplanes.

How?

Bradford wondered if he would ever know.

Somehow he felt closer to the answer tonight than ever before. This day had brought him some revealing words straight from the lips of the mad old mystic himself. And now the decks were being cleared for a more intimate glimpse. The very fates seemed to have conspired to bring him closer to the core of the mystery.

But at what a cost!

This morning Hank had gone *down*.

This afternoon Schubert, the one sailor out of all this gang of criminals that he was most inclined to trust, had departed on the most perilous mission

—that of shadowing Jag Rouse. Schubert would be lucky if he got back alive.

And now Vivian was gone . . . The courageous little spitfire must have had a lot of confidence in Ross to take his advice and cut loose. But perhaps, as Fantella had come so near admitting, she wasn't more than a stone's throw—

"Pudgy!" Bradford called.

An answer came across the parade grounds from the group of sailors on guard duty. In a moment Pudgy came up the porch steps and saluted.

"Take over for me, Pudgy," said Bradford. "If anyone finds a trace of her, make a record of it. I'm guessing nothing will turn up before the party comes back from the fishing village."

The sailor saluted and took up his station on the porch. Bradford took a circuitous route through the halls, made his way to the kitchen.

HE FOUND four maids finishing up the evening's work. Back in the pantry Fantella was checking over the supplies.

"Made that cake yet, Fantella?" Ross called.

"Cake in der pig's eyes," she snorted. "I ought to dumbust you ofer der head."

She dismissed the four maids, then turned on Ross. "Vell, vat iss?"

"Four-three-O," said Ross pointing to the hands of her kitchen clock, "means four-thirty—tomorrow morning."

"Vell?"

"You know who comes for breakfast at that hour," he said, nodding at her.

"Ugh?" she blinked.

"See here," said Bradford. "This crippled fellow, Jimpson, who lives in a cave down the side of the cliff, is my friend as well as yours. I know that you put out food for him, and I know he climbs up the cliffside by a secret trail."

"You know vun lot," she grunted.

"Jimpson has done me favors before. I need his help some more."

"Vat do I do?"

"Deliver a message for me along with his four-thirty breakfast. It's very urgent. It's about my pal—the one they sent down through the trapdoor this morning. If his body hasn't washed away, Jimpson might recover it. The sea has been calm all day—"

"Der sea iss calm, you tink?" Fantella made a sarcastic mouth.

"I don't suppose there'll be a chance by morning," said Ross. "If there was any way to get word to him yet tonight, I'll risk my neck to do it."

"Vould you risk your neck down Jimpson's secret cliff trail in der dark?"

Ross considered. "That hidden trail's on the south and west side of the cliff, so I could use a flashlight without being seen by the search parties."

"Der maids could see you if dey looked down vrom der vest vindows."

"That's true, but it isn't likely. Anyway, I'll take a chance."

"Und I'll chase der maids off der oder vay."

"Good girl, Fantella. Here we go."

ROSS strung a cord through a fresh flashlight and hung it from his neck so that his hands would be free. Fantella held the door open, and the spray of light showed the first footsteps down the ragged cliffside. Ross felt his way down into the blackness. A brisk sea breeze whipped through his hair.

"Don't you go vlying off into space." The warning note in Fantella's voice revealed a sentimental nature that she usually kept hidden under a hard-boiled crust.

"I'll be careful," said Ross. "If I can't make it I'll be back soon."

His sore hands gripped like claws as the rocky surfaces steepened.

"I vouldn't go too far," came Fantella's final warning. "You shouldn't haf to."

"Now what did she mean by that?" Ross muttered to himself.

Presently his foot struck a rope and he made his way down to where he could get a firm grip on it. He remembered having seen the crippled Jimpson see-saw along with the aid of ropes, like a phantom climbing up through the early morning fog. If a crippled person could fight his way along this trail, Ross should be able to.

But Jimpson knew the trail. Ross didn't. And trying to learn it in utter darkness was perilous business. Where the devil were those footholds that Jimpson's twisted "mud-chain" legs had used? Ross' toes dug at the wall for a footing, and slipped off into space.

Ross caught his breath. For a moment he was hanging over black emptiness, clinging to the rope for dear life. The rope began to give. Ross thrust his head forward and clamped his teeth down on a tuft of grass rooted in the perpendicular wall. The rope ceased to slip. He clung desperately. He couldn't remember that Jimpson had ever depended entirely upon the ropes, and he was no doubt fifty pounds heavier than Jimpson.

Cautiously he swayed his torso until the flashlight began to swing like a pendulum. His teeth released their tenuous hold, his head bowed enough to take advantage of the light.

Again the rope was slipping—slipping. He was going down with the sag. If that rope tore free, he'd get the very death-plunge he had escaped twelve hours earlier. Suddenly one end broke loose. He was dropping -

But there was another rope beneath him—and a bit of ledge beneath it. His clutching hands caught hold, his feet caught his weight before the new rope was put to a test. Again he was on a solid station.

HE HUGGED the wall until he got his breath. He was only four or five feet below the end of the dangling rope. He had succeeded in taking a shortcut to this lower level. But shortcuts were invitations to death. Moreover, leaving a half-ruined trail behind him would defeat his own purpose.

Should he try to go on? It wasn't often that Ross Bradford stopped in the middle of a course of action to reconsider his decision. He held the flashlight as far out as he could reach, to study the zig-zag trail below him. The wall extended endlessly, to be swallowed up in purple mists.

He shot the beam upward. He had traversed less than a tenth of the trail. No, it wasn't worth the risk. Jimpson might have recovered Hank Switcher's crushed body already. If so, Ross would get word by four-thirty in the morning.

If the body was lost to the sea, as it probably was, then nothing could be done. Nothing except to make sure that body hadn't been sacrificed in vain. The way for Ross to make sure was to get back on the job with Graygortch, and avoid every avoidable risk.

Now he found the upward trail that he had missed on the descent. A few feet along the way he stopped, startled by a faint light that was growing out of the rocks *below the level of the castle.*

He snapped off his flashlight, clung to the wall, waited. He was breathing heavily, his swollen wrists were throbbing, but he thought nothing of that. The light was moving, growing brighter.

Suddenly it emerged from what appeared to be a narrow opening beneath

the foundation of the castle. It was a candle beam. Back of it was the brown weather-beaten face of Jimpson.

The crippled man was partly concealed by the ledges, but Ross could see that he was slogging along on his knees, holding up the candle with one hand. His eyes were peering down into the blackness.

So Fantella had somehow communicated with this curious fellow, telling him that he was about to have a visitor. Either that, or he had been hiding under the castle and had heard Ross clambering down among the ropes.

Ross answered the candle with a flashlight signal, and after a few minutes' return climb he joined the crippled man.

"This way, Mister Bradford," said Jimpson as pertly as if he were a bell boy conducting a guest into a swanky hotel. "We've been expecting you."

"Did you say *we?*"

"We've been expecting you," Jimpson repeated, spitting a piece of seaweed. "This way, please."

CHAPTER XIX

ROSS took the candle and followed after Jimpson, who made rapid progress on his hands and twisted knees.

"Low bridge," said Jimpson.

Ross bent low as they passed under massive timbers. This subterranean area was all new to him. He had once visited the castle's basement, and glimpsed the miniature power station and the lead-in pipes that brought water power from the Flinfiord river. But this cavern was on a still lower level—a sub-basement hideaway among the stone columns that formed the castle's foundation.

"Wouldn't it be easy for a man to get caught down here?" he asked.

"Not so easy," said Jimpson. "There's lots of tricky passages. But a man *did* get caught here."

"When?"

"This morning," said Jimpson, turning to give Ross a cocksure nod. "I caught him myself."

"I don't know what you're talking abou—" Ross broke off with a gulp.

Out of the cavernous shadows a man was approaching—a stocky, turtle-like figure. *It was Hank Switcher.*

"Merry Christmas," said Hank, grinning. "How's the weather up on top?"

"Well, blow me down!" Ross stopped in his tracks. "Am I seeing ghosts? I never believed in them before. This must be a dummy—"

"Don't start calling me names," Hank snorted, grabbing Ross by both hands to prove that he was real.

"I still think you're a ghost," Ross laughed. "I can't figure it out unless Jimpson picked you out of the sea, piece by piece, and pasted you together—"

"Not out of the sea, out of the air," said Hank. "Jimpson's keeping the honor of beating the death-trap all to himself."

"How'd you do it, Jimpson?" Ross asked. "You must have some other hobbies besides collecting statistics."

"This way, gents," said the crippled man. "My newest secret invention."

The cavern opened over a wide sloping rock beneath the overhanging porch. Several upright timbers formed an arcade to support the overhead structure. Here the brisk sea breeze swept through and the dull roar of the waves echoed up from five hundred feet below.

"I recognize that floor above us," said Ross. "That's where Hank and I walked the chalkline."

They moved out along the wide sloping rock to the limits of safety, and Ross pointed his flashlight up to the timbered surface that extended beyond.

"Yes," he said, "there's the trapdoor. But it's a full ten feet out of reach. How in the name of common sense—M-m-mm."

Ross became absorbed in the apparatus at his feet.

"These beams swing out," said Jimpson. "That's my invention. See?"

He gave the beams a push with his twisted legs. They swung slowly, with a low scraping sound.

"You see, it's like a big basketball net on two arms," said Jimpson proudly. "Remember that time I had you return me some wire? You were on the roof and you sent me down some pocket tools, too. Tools and wire, that was all I needed. There were plenty of scrap timbers here under the castle."

ROSS passed an appraising eye over the intricately spliced scraps of poles that formed the two beams. He noted the crude makeshift hinges, securely anchored to each side of a foundation pillar. He turned the flashlight on the outer ends of the beams to examine the loose network of wire.

"A catch-basket," he mused. "How'd you manage to build it out on those ends?"

"Crawled out," said Jimpson. "That wasn't nothing. These legs of mine are skid-proof."

"So there's the answer," said Hank, hooking his thumbs in his armpits. "I fell through the floor, and *pop*, here I was, right in the net."

"You came up laughing, I suppose," said Ross.

"I fainted," said Hank.

"By the way," Jimpson explained, "it's a good thing you postponed *your* trip, Mr. Bradford. You see, I had to get this gent out before you dropped in. This is only a one-man catch basket."

"Then if I had dropped through, both of us would have gone down."

"Exactly," said Jimpson. "Next, you remember, the trapdoor stuck while half open. Luckily I had succeeded in swinging the beams, together with Mr. Switcher, out of sight. Otherwise my game would have been discovered."

"If I ever give out any medals," Ross smiled, "I'll see that you get one, Jimpson."

The clatter of footsteps sounded ominously from the floor overhead.

"That's the maids," Ross whispered. "They're searching the castle for Vivian."

"We'd better get back into the shadows," said Jimpson. "If they should think of looking *under* the castle, you two gentlemen would be on the spot."

"Only Hank," said Ross. "He's still wanted for the murder of a sailor. But I'm no longer a fugitive."

"How'd you square yourself with Jag Rouse?" Hank asked.

"I didn't. He's still on my trail. But I had the extreme pleasure of seeing him dismissed. Four of my guards conducted him halfway to the East Village, and Schubert, my confidante, shadowed him the rest of the way."

Hank was gasping. "*Your* guards! *Your* confidante!"

Ross shrugged modestly. "You see I've been promoted. The big boss, Graygortch, fancied me as an A-one killer, so he's made me chief of the guards, replacing Rouse."

"No! You don't mean it!"

"Not so loud, Hank," Ross warned. "If they found me here with you I'd have to bring you back as a captive. And I might have to execute you."

"Verily ye little bullfrogs!" Hank panted. "I'd better tie something over my mouth so I won't even whisper. Hey, wait a minute. You wouldn't have any legal grounds to execute—"

"This place is a law unto itself," Ross whispered.

"But I mean—look at this, Ross. I ought to be up for a reward instead of a trial."

HANK produced an old printed sheet of paper and held it in front of the flashlight. Ross recognized the picture as the sailor that Hank had shot and killed. The sailor was wanted for murder and embezzlement back in the United States. A liberal reward was offered.

"That," Hank whispered, "is what our friend Jimpson dug up for me."

Jimpson, leading the way through the under-castle maze, turned and bowed a proud acknowledgment. "I've got dozens of them," he said. "Collecting useless junk—that's another of my hobbies. They throw stuff down a waste chute from the basement, and I paw through it just to pass the time. Most of these sailors are so proud of their crimes that they brought some credentials with them. I've got a regular library up here. I'll show you."

"Is this where you live?" Ross asked.

"This is only my penthouse," said Simpson. "My regular home is a bit of cave down near the water."

Ross folded up the printed sheet and handed it back to Hank.

"Keep it. If you ever get back to the States it might do you some good. But it doesn't mean anything around here. This place thrives on criminals."

Hank stopped with a puzzled frown. "Of course you'll change all that, now that you're the chief."

"Not at all," said Ross. "I'm the biggest criminal of the bunch. Just ask Schubert—or Graygortch himself. They've got my number."

"Have you been hit on the head since I saw you last?" Hank asked.

"S-s-s-sh," Jimpson warned, extinguishing his candle. "They're searching the basement. They might look down the waste chute—"

Ross snapped off his flashlight. He could hear the footsteps thudding leisurely along the basement floor. The waste chute, which he had barely glimpsed a moment previous, now gave down a thin shaft of light. Voices echoed down with a rain-barrel effect.

"Dot's der vaste chute," Fantella's tone was one of disgust. "It's not likely she vould haf slid down to der dirt heap."

"But it *is* possible," the low rumbling voice of Graygortch rejoined.

"Bah! Dot's silly. If she vent dot vay, she could haf slid right on down der rocks, chust like der dirt, ker-splash in der ocean."

"If they don't find her at one of the villages," said Graygortch, "we must send a sailor down to look."

"Vell, maybe a sailor, but no maid. I tell you, no voman vould choose to go swimming in dat mess—"

"HELLO, up there," Ross broke in. He moved toward the chute, turning his flashlight beam on it. "I'm down here looking for Vivian."

"Ach! It's dot new chief, Bradford," Fantella's voice sounded clear through the opening.

"Good," said Graygortch in a satisfied tone. "I should have known that no hiding places would escape him."

"I haven't found a trace," Ross called up to them, shooting his flashlight around the premises. "A few more minutes and I'll be through—"

He swallowed his words. His flashlight stopped pointing straight at Vivian. If it had been a camera it would have caught a perfect picture of a frightened girl half-crouched at the further side of a heap of trash, clutching a small gray book against her breast. Her clothes were soiled, her face was streaked with dirt, her eyes were wild

with the light of terror. She looked as if she were about to scream.

"Not a sign of her," Ross repeated loudly, his voice suddenly taut. "I don't think she's here, but I'll keep on looking."

"Dot's right," Fantella called back. "Keep on looking."

"And if there's any news from the village, I'll come up at once," said Ross, moving back from the chute. "I think that's where she's gone." He turned the flashlight on his own face and placed a finger across his lips as he talked—a signal of silence that Vivian couldn't miss.

There was a short stillness. Then the low rattle of Graygortch's words could be heard.

"All right . . . We'll go back and wait."

As soon as the slowly retreating footsteps from overhead faded away, Ross turned the light back to Vivian.

"Oh, Ross," she gasped, "what a scare you gave me. If it had been anybody else but you—"

"Don't worry," Ross whispered. "Fantella and I are working together now. She couldn't have come any nearer confiding in me if she had drawn a picture."

"Fantella, bless her heart," Vivian sighed. "I'd have been too scared to run away if she hadn't helped me. And then I'd have had to marry you. Wouldn't that have been awful?"

"Not so awful," Ross grinned.

"But they won't find me now, will they, Ross?"

"Gosh, you are a bit scared, aren't you?" He felt the trembling of her body as he took her arms gently in his hands. "Did my friends Jimpson and Hank know you were hiding down here?"

He glanced back toward the two men. Jimpson was relighting his candle. From his agreeably surprised countenance and Hank's puzzled blinking it was apparent that both men had been unaware of Vivian's presence.

"It's been many years since I've talked with you, Miss Graygortch," said Jimpson brightly, crawling on his hands and knees into her presence. "I don't suppose you remember me."

"Of course I do," said Vivian timidly. "I remember the day that you fell through. And the better days, too, that we used to have before all these troubles began."

"I'm surprised you remember," said Jimpson. "But you were a bright little kid."

"And you were the best engineer that we ever had. Uncle Bill used to say so himself. And I wrote it down in this book."

SHE handed the little gray-backed volume to Ross, who thumbed through its ink-filled pages.

"It's a diary," Ross mumbled. "Yours?"

"Yes, one I'd forgotten all about," said Vivian, passing the book on to Hank and Jimpson. "It got lost years ago. But I ran across it this afternoon in a pile of things over there by the waste chute."

"My library," said Jimpson. "The best gems from many a year's trash. Your diary's my choice volume."

"You've read it?" Vivian raised her eyebrows in alarm.

"Read it and memorized it, by George," said Jimpson. "It's all true, and darned curious, too; especially that part about the time your Uncle Bill was going to die and had his grave already dug—"

Vivian nodded, and she seemed to grow pale. "I was re-reading all that this afternoon," she said. "And since it got dark I've been thinking it all

over. It seems even stranger now than when I was a child."

Hank was scratching his head. "Did I hear you right? Did your uncle have his grave dug?"

"Yes . . . Yes, you can still see it —what's left of it—out in the yard. After nine years it's nearly filled in."

Vivian's eyes glowed with a mystical light. Only the candle was burning now, and the four of them were huddled around it. She sat near Ross and her half-shadowed face reminded him of some painting of a beautiful female specter lost in far-away fantasies.

"That's what I've been thinking," she went on. "I mean, how curious it was that Uncle Bill *didn't* die—when he was so sure he was going to—and Dr. Zimmerman thought he was dying."

"And then your uncle rallied," said Jimpson.

"Yes . . . in the strangest manner," said Vivian. "It was almost like a dead man coming back to life. But it was more than that. He rallied with a burst of bad temper, and began to glare at everyone with eyes that were somehow different. For a long time we couldn't get used to him. There was such a hard, insane glitter about his staring eyes, and such a heavy bitterness in everything said."

"That's the way I remember it," said Jimpson. "That's when Dr. Zimmerman and all his other friends deserted him."

"They had to," said Vivian. "He insulted them so terribly. He was as hateful as Satan."

"As hateful as Satan," Ross echoed under his breath. "What a comparison."

"But gradually we got used to him, and he began to distribute his mad spells at various intervals," said Vivian.

"A typical trait of many insane people," said Hank wisely. "The doctors would have a name for it."

"I'm not so sure," said Ross, gazing into the darkness.

"ANYWAY," Vivian went on with her nightmarish reminiscences, "Uncle Bill wasn't himself at all. At times he appeared to have forgotten things he had always known—"

"An amnesia victim with paranoic complications," Hank interpolated.

"He even seemed surprised, one time, to learn that you, Jimpson, had set up the power plant. And when you reminded him that you had patented several inventions, he gave you a lot of new work to do."

Jimpson nodded. "That's when I installed all the bells and gongs that turn the castle into a jangle whenever folks cross the halls."

"And then he put you to work on the big machine up in the top of the tower," said Vivian.

Ross caught his breath. "Am I to understand, Jimpson, that *you* are the inventor of that—"

"Not so fast, Mr. Bradford," Jimpson lifted a restraining hand. "I've been hurled over the cliff once for that job. I don't want to get in any more trouble over it."

"But you did invent it?"

"I did not," said Jimpson. "As God is my witness, I do not know what, under high heaven, could make that tower machine do the things it does. When I was putting the parts together I followed one detailed specification after another. Every instruction came directly from Old Bill Graygortch's lips Nothing was ever blueprinted."

"Then you just followed his orders?" Vivian asked, for on this obscure episode she was as curious as Ross and Hank.

"I followed them to humor your uncle. I was sure he was crazy. After all the bells and gongs I had set up, I supposed that big tower wheel of thirteen gun-like tubes was going to be some sort of electric whistle. It wasn't. It was a cataclysmic death spray. If you want to know how—or why—don't ask me. I only *made* the thing. I sure-as-hell didn't *invent* it."

Ross studied the twisted, warped, weather-beaten man with a respect that was almost reverence. The fellow was telling the truth, there was no doubt about that. In his brain and hands were a skill that any engineer might envy. In his heart was a heavy stone of resentment because that skill had been misused by a weird genius of death. The wonder was, thought Ross, that the fellow, staying on through the years to see what destruction his handiwork, through an ironic fate, brought about, had buried his inward bitterness in an outward sense of humor: his statistics, his mud-chain legs, his library of gems from the trash pile.

"But my Uncle Bill," said Vivian, still lost in her unhappy reverie, "was afraid that someone might understand the invention."

"Yes," said Jimpson "He suspected me before we got the thing finished. As soon as he sent out the first big storm he knew that I was on fire to analyze the thing to the last volt. So that was when he had Captain Rouse find me guilty—and you know the rest."

HANK, supporting his head in his hands, came to life with a jerk

"I don't get it," he said. "Was Graygortch an engineer before he went batty?"

"No," said Jimpson. "He couldn't even thread a pipe."

"Did he study up on engineering after he went batty?"

"No."

"Then how in the name of Edison and Einstein could he give you instructions that would turn into that nifty little earthquake gadget?"

Jimpson spread his fingers in a gesture of helplessness. Ross muttered sarcastically. "Accident."

"About as likely," said Hank, "as going into a print shop, dumping a dozen cases of type into a press and seeing it print off a Shakespearean play."

"Some day Graygortch will die," said Jimpson, "and then I'm going to climb to the top of the tower and see what makes that machine tick."

For a few minutes no one spoke. The mention of Graygortch's anticipated death, Ross noticed, caused not the slightest change in Vivian's intent face. But the thought had stuck in her mind.

"I wonder," she said wistfully, "what will happen when he does die."

Ross rose, planted his hands on his hips, looked from one to another of his three listeners.

"Today Graygortch has taken me into his confidence," he said quietly. "His plans for you and me, Vivian, are clear enough. But they're not our plans. They're plans so fraught with death and destruction that I hardly dare tell you."

"I'd better hear the worst," said Vivian. "I'm desperate from guessing." Her dirt-streaked face was pale in the candle's gleam.

"Perhaps I'll tell you, then, later. But I have a plan of my own. You three are the only ones I dare confide in. And time is growing short."

Ross paused, drew a slow deep breath.

"You three must trust me," he couldn't hold back the ominous tone

that crept into his voice. "You must believe that I have come to know Bill Graygortch as none of the rest of you know him. I'm convinced we mustn't wait for him to die."

Vivian gasped, "You mean—"

"For the good of all people, Vivian—the people you've warned on your radio against coming storms—and millions of other people like them, I've got to do it—the sooner the better. *I've got to kill Bill Graygortch.*"

CHAPTER XX

A CLATTER of footsteps sounded on the basement stairs and a female voice sang down through the waste chute.

"Meester Bradford, vare are you?"

"Here, Fantella." Ross marched over to the waste heap and looked up through the shaft. "What's up?"

"Iss everything safe?" she whispered. Reassured, she said, "Maybe it's ghosts, and maybe it's visskey, but der guards haf come back from der East Village saying Vivian might be hiding at dot place. Effry vun dey asked say he has seen a beautiful girl—a strange girl. But dey couldn't find her."

"A strange girl," Ross echoed. "Well, we won't be bothered, Fantella."

Hank spoke up. "That must be Sue Smith. Sure—that's who it is. She's still on the trail of that screwball Japanese."

"You'd better come up, Meester Bradford," said Fantella. "Dere's bad news about Meester Schubert, vot followed Rouse to der village."

"What happened?"

"Rouse dumbusted him ofer der head. He's at der doctor's in der East Village, and dey say he knows something, but he von't talk to nobody but you, Meester Bradford."

"Thanks, Fantella. I'll go over to the village yet tonight. I can depend on you to keep things going."

"Dot's me. I'll keep 'em looking vor der right people in der wrong places."

Rumors were running riot through the castle by the time Ross ascended to the South Pole plaza. The situation was a delicate one. It was up to him to pretend great concern over the story that Vivian was hiding in the East Village.

But the rumors didn't stop with that. Why, everyone was asking, had she run away to the East Village? Was it because Jag Rouse had gone there? No one believed, of course, that Vivian was secretly in love with the ex-captain. But perhaps he had a leverage on her, and had somehow frightened her into following him.

It seemed likely, too, the sailors and maids were telling themselves, that the report about Schubert dovetailed with this line of reasoning. No doubt Schubert had secret knowledge of Rouse's designs upon the girl, which knowledge he would impart only to Ross Bradford.

Ross listened to these ingenuous rumors with an attitude of credulity. He hastened to confer with Graygortch.

AGAIN, the same story. The old man was twitchy from his withered old face down to his toes. He sat hunched weakly over his desk, crushing his thin fingers against his gray forehead.

"Take *all* the guards with you, Bradford," Graygortch said, "just so you bring her back. My time is growing short."

"I prefer to go alone," Ross said.

"As you will," said Graygortch. "But do you know why your search party

failed to bring her back?"

"They were afraid of violence," said Ross.

"And rightly so," said the old man. "They were too badly outnumbered to risk a fight. That East Village is infested with desperate men. I advise that you take the whole force of guards—"

"And leave the castle unprotected?"

"This castle will stand—and I will live—until I have transferred my powers to Vivian. Bring her back."

"I will," said Ross, "but I'll go alone. I've picked up a dependable weapon and I know how to use it."

As he spoke he drew a light revolver from his pocket and weighed it in his hand. The old man barely glanced at it, then he again buried his troubled head in his hands, muttering, "Go on. You've no time to lose."

Ross looked at the revolver, glanced at Graygortch. Impulsively Ross' steady hand tightened on the weapon.

"Right," he said in a low, tight voice. "I've no time to lose."

"Well?" Graygortch spread his thin fingers and slowly raised his head. His wrinkled old eyes lifted and he might have looked into the barrel of Ross' revolver, but at that moment a knock sounded at the door.

"Shall I valk right in?" Fantella called.

As the door swung open Ross thrust the gun back in his pocket. Fantella breezed into the room with a tray of tea things.

"Maybe you vasn't ready for der midnight lunch yet?"

"I'm ready," said Graygortch. "Bradford was just leaving."

Ross stormed down the hallway muttering to himself. With all the real trouble he had on his hands he was going to have to chase off on a false mission—to rescue a girl who wasn't there—just to keep his own private hoax from falling through. But he did want to see Schubert.

Moreover, if it was true that Dr. Zimmerman, the man who used to care for Graygortch, was in East Village, there might be a chance to get some new light on these strange happenings.

ROSS waved aside the party of sailors waiting on the porch, expecting an order to accompany him.

"I'll make it alone," he snapped.

They grunted with surprise, but were obviously relieved. He also refused their offers to sketch a map of the mountain trail for him, but paused long enough to catch a description of the doctor's office where Schubert was being cared for. Then he marched on around the castle walk, out of their sight.

He hurried back to the rear porch. There he found Jimpson, Hank, and Vivian waiting. A moment later Fantella joined them in the heavy shadows of the cliff's edge. It was just midnight. The sky was black, the light breeze of the early evening had ceased. The lapping waters five hundred feet below were barely audible.

"It'll be easier by boat," said Jimpson. "This way, gents. And are the ladies going too?"

"No," said Ross.

"I want to go with you," said Vivian.

"You mustn't," said Ross. "It's too dangerous."

"That's why I'm going," Vivian declared with a touch of temper.

"Since I'm going to look for you," said Ross, "I couldn't possibly take you along. I'm taking Hank. That's all."

"Meester Bradford knows best," said Fantella. "Ve'll go only vun or two steps down der trail, to make sure dot Jimpson don't push you off."

Ross knew well enough that Fantella was simply keeping her eye on Vivian, to put her back in hiding as soon as he and Hank were gone. But there was no danger that guards would cross their paths along this cliff edge. All search parties had turned in for the night on the strength of the report from the East Village.

"Here's the other hidden descent I was telling you about," said Jimpson, crawling along at the head of the party. "It veers to the east, and you'll find it a pleasure after trying the one on the face of the cliff. When you get to the bottom, my boat is hidden among the crags to the right, under a pile of tree limbs."

"We'll find it," said Ross.

"Best of luck," said Jimpson, and he crawled back toward the foundation of the castle.

Hank took a light and jogged on down the trail. Ross turned to Vivian.

"'Suscuse me," said Fantella. Evidently her eyes saw through the dark well enough to know that Ross was folding the girl into his arms. "I tink I go back a vew steps and count der stars, vot dare ain't any of."

Hank called from down the trail. "You coming, Ross?"

"In a moment."

IT WAS a breathless moment. Vivian was whispering trivial things to him so earnestly that he wondered what had happened to the little spitfire she used to be. He reassured her.

"Of course I'll be careful, Vivian. . . I know they're a bad bunch over at the village, but I can walk around trouble . . . Yes, I promise I won't get myself killed—not if I see Rouse first. . . . Pood kid, you're all scared, aren't you? I don't blame you. . . . Come on, give me a funny little smile."

Then he was kissing her, and the whole world must have stopped breathing while her heart pounded close against his.

"But what if you never came back," she whispered.

"Then Graygortch couldn't make you marry me," Ross said. "But I'll be back before dawn. And if possible, I'll bring Dr. Zimmerman back here with me."

"Please do," said Vivian. "Maybe if you talked with him you wouldn't do that—that terible thing—"

"For your sake I hope I won't have to. I had a chance only a few minutes ago—with this revolver—but it wasn't easy—and I know how you feel. You think there's still a chance to bring him back to *himself*—"

"Yes, that's it," she gasped eagerly. "He does come back in his sleep, you know."

"I know," said Ross. The old man's change of character during his sleepwalking of the previous night was as baffling as anything Ross had seen. "But whatever I have to do, I want you to believe I think it's for the best."

"I will believe it," Vivian breathed. "From now on I'm trusting you all the way, Ross."

"Do you mean it? Enough to pack your things?" Ross sought her face anxiously. "Then do it, Vivian. Have Fantella smuggle you back into your room. Pack your cases for a long trip—"

"A long trip? You mean—you *are* going to kill him?"

"I don't know. But I'm sure of this. If something isn't done within the next day or two, he and his disciples of death will crack the world wide open."

Vivian's lithe body trembled in Ross's arms.

"I—I don't know what you mean—but I'll pack—for a long trip."

CHAPTER XXI

DOWN at the water's edge Ross and Hank threw the tree branches aside, untied the boat, and pulled it out of the hidden cove. In a moment their oars were dipping rythmically. The waters were calm, the rowboat was a light, trim craft that made good speed.

"Listen," said Hank. "If I had a pencil I'd jot down some local color for my next book. Got a pencil, Ross?"

"Keep right on rowing," said Ross.

"But *listen*—"

From somewhere beyond the black horizon came the low thunder of a sea battle, too far away for the flashes of fire to be seen. Somewhere out in that endless blackness, convoys were taking it on the chin.

An hour later, as Ross and Hank were rounding a mountainous point, they saw five bombers roar over—American bombers bound for an English airport.

"There *we* go," Hank muttered, "but for the grace of God."

"We've got our own war now," said Ross. "England and her Allies will never know how much *our* war means to theirs."

"Meaning what?" said Hank.

"Meaning that if this devil of a Graygortch puts his big purpose in life over, Hitler and the other twelve disciples of death will engulf us like wildfire. They'll have a power that all the good work in the world can't stop."

"You think Graygortch is a Nazi?"

"He's worse than a Nazi," Ross muttered. "He's some new brand of devil, if you want my candid opinion."

Hank gulped weakly. "I'd like to argue that out with you but I'm sure as hell not up to it. I've seen that little earthquake tower of Graygortch's do enough calisthenics that I get a chill to think of it."

The lights of the village emerged from behind a shoulder of black mountain. Hank spotted a landing place; Ross caught his bearings from the surrounding scene. Then they pulled in, hid the rowboat, and struck out on foot. As soon as they found a path they extinguished their flashlights.

The village was far from asleep. Lighted houses or taverns were noisy with raucous voices. Revelry and argument, drinking and gambling were evidently the rule all night long in these quarters. The place had nothing in common with the quaint little fishermen's village at the farther end of the island.

"Come on out and join us, you cowards. We dare you . . ."

Ross and Hank caught sight of what appeared to be a twelve or fifteen-man mob parading down the single street, shouting and blustering their challenge to their fellow-citizens to come join them. What a notion, thought Ross, running around at one-thirty in the night organizing gangs for the sheer excitement of it. He and Hank gave this weird night-traffic a wide berth. The unlighted outskirts of the village seemed the wiser route for strangers to take.

THEY spotted the lighted house on the knoll a short distance back from the village. That was the doctor's office. They found it barricaded by a fence of close-set timbers, and a locked gate.

But there was a bell and it brought a prompt answer.

"Dr. Zimmerman?" Ross asked.

"I'm his servant," said the man, unlocking the gate.

"I'm Ross Bradford, and this is a friend of mine. I was told that Schubert, one of my guards—"

"Yes—come right in."

The servant locked the gate behind them and led the way up the steps.

"He's just about gone," the servant whispered, conducting them into the dim blue light of a hallway. "He was all smashed up when they brought him in. Broken back, crushed-in ribs—"

"God!" Hank muttered. "How'd he get such a beating?"

"Oh, it's no more remarkable than the average around here. They're always going after each other with clubs of lead pipes. The doctor no more than gets one batch of 'em civilized till another batch breaks loose with a shooting or a knife act. If they'd only pay him for half the bandages—"

"Quiet," said Ross. "I hear him calling."

"Not calling, choking. But go right in," the servant whispered. "His delirium has run down, finally, but maybe he'll still recognize you."

Ross approached the bedside, looked down at the battered mass. He'd hardly have known it was Schubert except for the funny mouth with the overhanging teeth. Death was taking over. The fellow's face was chalk white, his eyelids were half closed.

But as Ross spoke to him, the eyes opened and gave a little turn of recognition.

"I hear you wanted to tell me something," Ross said.

Schubert turned his eyes away. His time for talking was past. But at this point the servant interceded.

"He's told it all, and the girl took it down. She claimed she was your friend, and this fellow knew the telling wouldn't wait."

"Okay," said Ross. He placed a hand on the dying man's head. "Thanks, Schubert, old man, for all you've done. . . . But I sure didn't mean to let you in for this pay-off."

Schubert made a last effort to speak, but the words wouldn't come. Then his funny mouth, as expressionless as ever, emitted a low whistle—a bit of melody.

"The wedding march?" said Ross. "Don't worry, Schubert. I'll see that that turns out all right."

One of Schubert's eyes gave a faint hint of a wink, then both eyes went closed.

IN ANOTHER room Ross and Hank held a brief consultation with the servant.

"Here's some money to cover the poor fellow's burial," said Ross. "By the way, what did the doctor do for him? Anything besides first aid bandages?"

"The doctor hasn't seen him," said the servant.

"Why not?"

"He's gone—over to the other village. Lots of business over there recently. Besides, he's shipping his wife off the island for the duration of the war."

"Will he back tonight?"

"Doubt it. He said he was going to stay and hound that British agent till he got some action—and that might be days."

"What kind of action?"

The servant's lips tightened. "Are you a Nazi?"

"Certainly not."

"Well, you might be, for all I know. Besides I've already told all I know."

"What happened to Sue Smith, the girl that took down Schubert's talk?" Hank asked.

"Her things are still here," said the servant. "She's been staying here with the doctor and his wife, and when they left she told them she'd come on a little later, but first she had some more writing to do. Then this fight happened, and when she came down from her room

and heard this fellow calling for Ross Bradford, she stuck around until he spilled his story to her. By the way—"

The servant picked up at note book from the library table.

"Here's what the fellow dictated to her. She said you'd be coming, Bradford, and I should give it to you."

Ross moved to the table lamp to read the finely written words. Hank, who had once fallen in love with Sue Smith upon his first glimpse of her handwriting, bent over Ross' shoulder.

The rambling message read:

This girl says she is a friend of yours and she'll sure get this message to you. So here goes. I don't know what your real game is, Bradford. If your're pulling a fast one on Graygortch and us sailors, it's no hair off my neck.

Anyhow you're okay by me, and I figure you'll fight your battle to a finish. I picked you to win when you first showed your face at the castle gate.

You see, I had a soft place in my heart for that cute little Vivian. I wanted her to get the right man. That's why I poisoned Graygortch against Jag Rouse. Jag knew it, and he knew I was too clever for him. But I slipped today. Two hours after we got here he was already working up steam for his attack on the castle—and that's what I especially wanted to warn you about. He went to work, and I shadowed him, figuring he'd forgot about me. But he hadn't, and he suddenly turned on me with a baseball bat.

He hasn't forgot you, either. So look out for him. He'll march on you when you least expect it. He's trying to pull the whole town in on his scheme. So you better double the guard on the castle.

That's about all, Bradford. Sorry I slipped, but I know you'll make it good.

Oh, yes, there's one thing more. This girl that's taking down my words has a cockeyed notion she's going out and throw a monkey wrench into Rouse's game. Tell her to lay off. That guy ain't to be played with. I know.

"HELL, she's still here," Hank muttered as he finished the message. "Come on, Ross."

Ross thrust the notebook in his pocket and turned to the servant.

"If she comes in, tell her we're looking for her. We'll be back in an hour if we don't find her."

The servant saw them to the gate and locked it behind them. They headed straight for the lighted street where they had seen the night throng parading.

"Where there's excitement, that's where you'll find Sue Smith," said Hank proudly. "She's not afraid of anything."

"Listen!" Ross hissed.

"Yeah — that's your ex-captain's voice," Hank whispered.

"He's making a speech. Schubert was right . . ."

They slipped along a shadowed alley. A bonfire was burning at the intersection of the two principal streets. A crowd of some eighty or a hundred assorted men, variously armed, stood around the fire in a circle. The big-shouldered ex-captain was pacing back and forth as he addressed them.

Ross and Hank held to the shadows.

"Look at that gallery of faces," Hank whispered.

"They look like trouble." Ross took an uneasy breath. "We don't know our grounds here. The best thing for us is to find that girl and shove off."

"Listen at him rave," Hank's eyes widened, reflecting the flicker of the bonfire. "He's been here less than half a day and already they're eating out of his hand."

"It's his magnetic personality, boys," said a female voice behind them. "One side, please."

Hank ducked like a turtle bobbing into its shell, gasping. "Don't shoot—"

Ross whirled, more alarmed by Hank than the girl's voice, which was a comparatively harmless voice.

Then Ross' eyes, still dancing with the flames of the bonfire, came to rest on a pretty, snappily dressed American girl. Apparently she was armed with nothing more dangerous than pencil and notebook. She was writing with furious speed.

"Sue!" Hank murmured.

"Not now, Hank. I'm busy," she snapped. "One side, please. You're blocking my view."

Ross, at first puzzled by her abrupt manner, soon saw that she was taking down the ex-captain's speech, word by word. This was strange business, he thought. Here within a stone's throw of those dangerous men, here at two-thirty in the night, this girl had planted herself in a dark doorway—to copy the violent and ungrammatical ravings of one Jag Rouse.

"I told you she's doing a newspaper job on Hinko, the Japanese," Hank whispered. "She's still on the trail."

UP TO this time Ross hadn't taken particular notice of the small dark Oriental near the center of the throng. But now he recalled having seen that important little figure once before. It was the same fiery little Japanese with the big sword who got chased off the castle grounds a few mornings ago. The little man had recovered his dignity in a wonderful way.

Rouse's speech terminated abruptly, and was greeted with a volley of shouting and noise-making. As he retired to the crowd, it was the swaggering little Japanese who marched up to take his place.

"You have heard the honorable gentleman's plea that you make him your leader," Hinko's voice rang out in a thin Oriental twang. "I assume that he would be pleased to have you storm the gates for him and make him your hero when you have won his battle. But I ask you, who deserves to be the leader of this attack? *He or I?"*

There was a wild clamor that attested to a lack of unity in the ranks. The Japanese waved his sword with a militant gesture.

"This attack was not his idea. It was our own plan, conceived several days ago. And now that the plan is ripe, like a delicious fruit, is it fair for him to come and pick it?"

Ross glanced at Sue Smith's flying fingers. She was even recording the scrambled omelet of shouts that the crowd hurled back at their orator.

"I ask you," the speaker went on, "who has come from the farthest land in answer to the magnetic call? *It is I.* Who has organized this march on the castle gates? *It is I.* Who is so rightfully your strong man—your leader of leaders—so convinced of his power that he would sooner commit hara-kiri than fail in his purpose? *It is I.*

"And what has this newcomer done to prove his power? He has flown at a man half his size and beat him to pulp with a club. What if he does have one arm wrapped in a bandage? Is breaking a man's back with a club any feat to glorify a leader? Is there anyone within the sound of my voice who hasn't done as much himself?

"Then let me put the question to a vote. How many of you favor me—"

A bellowing *NO!* from Jag Rouse drowned Hinko's words. The Japanese drew his sword back threateningly, but its gleam was matched by the revolver that Jag Rouse flashed ominously in the

firelight. However, it was voice rather than weapons that gave Jag Rouse his advantage.

"LISTEN to me," he roared, and the hills echoed back of him. "I'm the only living man who has ever stood at the top of the tower with Graygortch during the storms. I'm the only man among you who knows the castle and the grounds. And one thing more. When we've crashed the gates and taken possession, I'll make every one of you a disciple of death, just like Hitler, Goebbels, Goering, and all the rest. *You, too, can be a Hitler*—and *soon*—perhaps tomorrow night. I'll lead you on the first black night."

This brought such a thundering cheer that Jag Rouse turned on Hinko with an incinerating smile. Jag had won them over and he was quick to play his advantage. He bellowed:

"And if our little friend here is a man of his word—if he insists on committing hara-kiri because he's missed the boat, I say to him—"

At the peak of his oratorical powers Jag Rouse left a sentence unfinished, for at that precise moment the fiery little Oriental drew his sword and plunged it into his own stomach.

The crowd swayed and surged forward and a chorus of low voices rasped with surprise.

Back in the shadows Sue Smith dropped her pencil and notebook, ran out toward the crowd. Ross sprang after her, jerked her back into the darkness.

"I've got to see!" she gasped.

But there was an opening in the ranks of the throng and the three spectators watching from the alley caught a clear view of the action.

Hinko crowded the sword hard into his belly, twisted it, yanked it sharply to one side. Doubled up on the ground, he emitted a wild scream that echoed out through the night's blackness. Then his arms fell limp.

The cold silence was broken by low rattling laughter from Jag Rouse.

CHAPTER XXII

THEY rowed back by way of the fishermen's village. If Dr. Zimmerman was still on the island, Ross intended to see him, regardless of the hour.

The first gray of dawn was upon them by the time they shipped oars at the fishermen's wharf. Sue Smith, who had been jotting notes on the gory climax of her hara-kiri research, irrespective of darkness and a bumpy boat, hastily packed her notebooks away. Hank helped her out of the boat with conspicuous gallantry.

"At your service, Beautiful."

"Very kind of you, Sir Walter, r'ally."

Ross, having made the boat fast, joined them. The trio jogged up the stony path toward the office of the British agent.

"By George, there's a light still burning," Ross observed.

Through the window they could see the clean-cut young British agent and an older man bending over a table, apparently studying a map.

"That's Dr. Zimmerman with the silver hair," said Sue. "Looks like he's had an all night conference with the agent." She raised her voice. "Hi-yo, Silver!"

The alarm brought only the slightest response from the two preoccupied men. The British agent gave an automatic nod toward the open door, as if to tell Ross and his party they were welcome to enter. They trooped in and seated themselves on the bench.

"Well, that finishes the plans for the

air base," said the doctor with a sigh of satisfaction. He put his spectacles in his pocket, looked at his watch. "Bless my soul, it's almost morning. And here you've got three customers already . . . Well, Miss Smith, what's new?"

"Plenty," said Sue. "My H. K. case jumped off the deep end. Stabbed himself amidships because a big bully came along and stole his glory."

She quickly sketched the developments that were hatching among the malcontents of East Village.

"So they're organizing to march on the castle," the doctor frowned. Ross saw at once that there were intense depths of feeling in this tall well-built silver-haired man, recalling stories of the old friendship that had once existed between him and Graygortch.

"A MARCH on the castle," the curt young British agent echoed. "There we are again, Doctor. More trouble. One more argument on top of all I've given you."

"Yes, yes," the doctor was impatiently defensive, and yet there was in his manner an effort at fairness. "One more argument, as you say. I suppose I've simply postponed trouble . . . I don't know why . . ."

"I know why," the young agent said. "You're a sentimentalist. Just because you spent your best years playing checkers with an old crony, you won't face the fact that he's gone mad."

"All right, you've said all that before," the doctor shrugged.

"And you won't face the fact that he's aiding the Nazi cause."

"That, I insist, is simply a coincident," the doctor said.

"Coincident or intent," the British agent snapped, "the result is all the same. Every week it happens—two or three freighters are demolished, planes are blown right out of the skies, bombers being flown over from America are—"

The British agent broke off, turned his argument toward Ross.

"Here's an instance right in our midst," he said. "This man, Doctor, is an American volunteer pilot who was slapped down out of the sky only a few nights ago. He and his pal can tell you—"

"Am I doubting it?" the doctor asked. "I regret the accident, of course. But the mysterious nature of such accidents is more than we can hope to understand."

"You're stubborn. You've continually held out against the thing I've proposed," said the agent. "Except for you I would have ordered a military assault on that castle—"

"No! It's not a military objective. Old Bill Graygortch was as loyal a British subject as I ever knew. He could never intend any harm—"

"You're a blind, stupid fool, Doctor," the young agent exploded. "I'm warning you. If you haven't enough influence with Graygortch to stop this business, I won't be accountable for what happens. The fact is, I fully expect British bombers to fly over and do their worst the next time there's a storm."

The big silver-haired doctor stiffened. "I suppose you've ordered them to come and take action?"

"I've received official warning that they *will* come the very next time any damage is reported. Now that we've completed plans for an air and sub base here, you know they're not going to tolerate these man-made earthquakes."

"If I could only talk with Bill," said Dr. Zimmerman, "the way I used to talk with him—"

"He's had his official warnings from

this office repeatedly," the agent went on. "Personally, I think nothing short of a mop-up will do it. Now: If those damned East Villagers are in a mood to march up the mountain and clean house, I'm for them. I'll authorize it. It's the very thing we need, Doctor. Don't you see—"

AT this point Ross broke into the argument.

"I beg to disagree."

"On what grounds?"

"We've just come from East Village," said Ross, "and I wouldn't trust that gang of cutthroats to make paper dolls. They wouldn't put an end to the storms. Their plan is to take over the storm apparatus and use it themselves. After all, it's just a big massive electrical machine."

Both Dr. Zimmerman and the agent looked at Ross skeptically. Hank gave Sue Smith a nudge and a whisper. "Look at 'em burn up. They hate to be told."

"Yes," said the curt young agent, "we *presume* it's a machine—"

"I know damned well it's a machine," said Ross. "I've seen it."

Dr. Zimmerman turned to Sue Smith. "Does this young man know what he's talking about?"

"He ought to," said Sue. "He's been up in the castle tower. He's beat the death trap. He's been made the chief of Graygortch's guards. And he's just told me he's talked with the engineer that put the storm machine together."

"Wait a minute. Not so fast."

Her final claim was too much for Dr. Zimmerman, who shook his head decisively.

"No, Miss Smith. That talk doesn't go. The engineer who did the job went down the death trap years ago—"

"And *lived*," said Ross. "His name's Jimpson. The fall crippled him, but he's still kicking. By the way, he lent us our rowboat last night."

Dr. Zimmerman's face did an assortment of blank stares. For a moment all he could do was repeat his conviction that Jimpson was dead.

A brown, bewhiskered hermit living among the crags at the foot of the castle cliff? Yes, he'd heard of such a creature, but no fisherman had ever bothered to inquire the fellow's name. So that was Jimpson!

"You've stumbled onto a lot of things, young man," said Dr. Zimmerman, eyeing Ross with warm approval.

"I'm trying to get to the bottom of this mess," said Ross. "I could use your help, Doctor."

The big silver-haired man turned to Susan Smith. "Young lady, why didn't you tell me about all this before?"

"Don't you remember," Sue rejoined, "I said I'd met a screwball writer named Hank—"

"I object," said Hank.

"—who had a pilot friend named Bradford that was a genius -and the last I knew, the two of them had got swallowed up in the castle? Well, these are the birds. Don't be misled by their simple faces, Doc. They pack some hidden wallops."

THE British agent snapped his fingers impatiently. "Bradford, what's your opinion about this castle menace? If you've had an inside view aren't you convinced the old man's crazy?"

"The problem's not that simple," said Ross. "But I agree with you that the thing's got to be stopped—and soon—for more reasons than you know."

"But how?"

"The simplest thing," said Ross, "would be to administer a mercy killing to the old man."

The doctor caught his breath. "I'm not sure it could be done."

"Why not?"

"As a doctor, I can't give any scientific reason. But as a close observer of what happened several years ago, when Graygortch almost died, I have my doubts about the effectiveness of any effort to kill him, even if we were willing to try."

"I don't get you," Hank blurted.

"I believe," the doctor said, *"that Graygortch can't be made to die."*

For a full minute no one said anything. Ross' gaze roved toward the out-of-doors, lingered on the heavy gray mists of dawn. A thin rain was in the air.

"Daylight's on us," he said. "We've got to hurry on to the castle. Troubles are brewing fast up there, but I'll keep you both in touch."

"Bradford," said Dr. Zimmerman, "if I can be of any help—*short of doing harm to my old friend* — let me know."

Ross studied the big silver-haired man closely. There was no denying his sincerity. His blind spot was centered on one deep-rooted sentiment—friendship. If this could be set aside, Dr. Zimmerman might be a useful ally.

"I wish you'd come up to the castle," Ross said. "I need you."

The doctor nodded slowly. "If you think it's safe. I was thrown out the last time—"

"I'll guarantee your safety. Come to the main gate. This afternoon? . . . Good. You'll arrive in time for a wedding, but don't take it too seriously."

"I'll come," said Dr. Zimmerman. . . .

They rowed back to the foot of the hidden trail, camouflaged the boat with tree limbs, and ascended, under a shroud of mist, to the rear door of the castle. With Fantella's help they smuggled themselves in without being seen.

Hank returned to the sub-basement quarters to remain in hiding.

Susan Smith was conducted to Vivian's private quarters.

ROSS repaired to his own room and slept till mid-forenoon.

On awakening he summoned a sailor to dispatch the news to Graygortch and the rest of the castle that he had found Vivian and brought her back unharmed.

The sailor returned shortly with the news Ross expected. Graygortch had set the wedding for that afternoon, an hour before sundown. . . .

By mid-afternoon the sun was baking down on the castle grounds.

A squad of soldiers met Dr. Zimmerman at the gate, escorted him, with a show of dignity born of a recent curtain-lecture, up the steps and onto the castle porch. Sailors and maids stopped work to peek at the newcomer. This was strange treatment being meted out to a visitor. But Bradford, the new chief, made a practice of doing things his own way, they whispered, and took themselves back to work.

Bradford led the doctor around to a spacious section of porch where shade, a sea-breeze, and a pitcher of ice-water made for perfect comfort.

"There's been many a change," Dr. Zimmerman observed, "since I last saw this place. All these timber reinforcements are new."

"The castle has had to be reinforced top to bottom, inside and out," said Ross.

"I can readily appreciate that," said the doctor. "Every time we get a storm from the tower I expect my office to flatten. I always lose several bottles of valuable medicine. Which reminds me—"

The doctor opened a small medicine case, selected a little yellow box.

"I've been thinking over our morn-

ing's discussion. These bizarre demonstrations Bill Graygortch is said to give during his somnambulant walks strike me as being particularly significant. Are you familiar with the phenomena I refer to?"

"Quite," said Ross. "I had the pleasure of seeing one of these exhibitions recently."

"Is it true that his manner was quite different?"

"A complete contrast," said Ross. "While it lasted he was as charming and gentle an old fellow as I ever saw."

"That," said Dr. Zimmerman, "is Bill Graygortch as I know him."

"I wish you could have been here. By the way, he asked for you."

The doctor weighed the little yellow pill box in his hand uneasily.

"If there's anything I dislike," he said, "it's turning an old friend into a case study."

"I understand," said Ross. "But if you were convinced that all human life over the face of this earth was going to suffer—possibly die—because of Bill Graygortch—"

"I'd manage to put sentiment aside," the doctor said grimly.

ROSS wanted to shake his hand, for he know what a fight it must have been for this silver-haired old sentimentalist to come to this decision.

"His conduct while walking in his sleep," said Zimmerman, "may give us our key to the mystery. So I brought my medicine kit."

"Some pills to cause sleep?"

"More particularly to cause *disturbed* sleep," said the doctor. "Maybe they're not quite strong enough to make a *paralyzed* man walk in his sleep, but they'd make him try. So they should bring some results for us this evening, if I may stay here through the dinner hour."

"You're only too welcome. You'll have the special privilege of preparing Graygortch's meal," said Ross.

The clink of a bell announced that someone was emerging from a hallway leading to the porch. With slow unsteady footsteps the aged Graygortch came into view.

Fantella evidently had put the finishing touches to the old man's preparations for the wedding, for his long-tailed coat was neatly brushed, and there was a white rose in his lapel. A touch of powder softened the sharp lines of his face.

As Ross stepped to his side, Graygortch mumbled some low words of praise for the return of his niece. Vivian had come in to see him, had appeared none the worse for her frightening runaway experience.

This said, Graygortch started to totter off in the other direction.

"One moment, your honor," said Ross. "An old friend of yours has come to see you. Look."

Graygortch stopped. His arms drew to his sides defensively and the wrinkles around his eyes tightened.

"Here he is," said Ross, motioning Dr. Zimmerman to step up and join them.

The doctor obeyed hesitantly, then shaking off his timidity he approached with a genial smile and offered his hand.

"How are you, Bill Graygortch? I'm your old friend *Zim*. It's been nine years—"

"I don't know you," said Graygortch coldly.

He turned his head away sharply, gave his shoulders a perturbed twist. He walked to the next porch entrance before he said any more. Then he shot hard glaring eyes back at the doctor.

"Whoever you are, you don't belong here. You'd better leave."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE wedding took place on the east porch.

Unlike most weddings, as Fantella was heard to remark afterward, it came off precisely according to plan. The mystical Graygortch was seeing his way, step by step, to the fulfillment of his scheme.

The silver-haired doctor, Ross noted, was wise enough to keep himself in the background during the ceremony. But Fantella and all the maids crowded close around the porch rails, whispering excitedly. Ross could hear them, during those tense moments before the ceremony began, wagering that Vivian wouldn't go through with it.

The sailors, too, watched with skeptical eyes. They knew that their sinister old master had decreed this union, and they fully expected their dashing young chief to declare himself in some spectacular manner.

Since Bradford had come all the way from America to be a candidate, they reasoned, he ought to carry the event off with an air of victory, like a high-class criminal that puts over a big bank robbery and a couple of killings. Or if he had changed his mind about the girl, they would expect him to break out of the traces before he was hitched. They were doomd to disappointment, for he did neither. To the sailors he was an enigma.

But it was Vivian's private reactions that interested Ross most.

A moment or two before Graygortch gave the signal for the ceremony to begin, Ross and Vivian exchanged words in the hallway.

"I suppose you've got something planned to break up the ceremony," Vivian said, searching his expression.

"I wouldn't depend on it," said Ross.

"You're expecting that attack from the East Villagers—"

"No," said Ross. "I've got lookout men posted but they haven't seen any activity."

"Am I to believe, *Mr.* Bradford," her voice was tinged with temper, "that you are going to calmly and deliberately marry me?"

"Your uncle's orders, dear," Ross smiled.

"Oh, I see. Then you're only doing it to please *him?*"

"Isn't that *your* reason?" Come, we've got to do a good job of pretending or we'll be in trouble."

"You don't *want* to marry me, really, do you?"

Ross smiled. The sudden flare-up of her spitfire nature was amusing. "Are you proposing to me, my dear?"

"Ross, you're exasperating! When I ran away I should have stayed—"

"S-s-sh! You're supposed to be looking happy," Ross warned. He added in a low voice, "Don't forget, you're packing your things for a long trip."

The note of sincerity brought him a quick eager look.

"You do mean it, don't you?"

"Vivian, *this* marriage may be a sham, but somewhere there's a real one waiting—if we can fight out of this tangle with your uncle."

AT that moment Fantella swept past, caught Vivian by the arm, led her across to another porch door. Graygortch signalled for bride and bridegroom to come before him, he read a brief ritual, the couple repeated their vows and were declared man and wife.

At which point Ross spoke a few sharp words to cut short any further festivity. This impending invasion from the East Village was no idle rumor, he warned. It was time to forget weddings and think about the dan-

gers at hand.

"Get back to your posts," he said. "It may not come today, but whenever it comes, our sailors aren't going to be caught napping. *Remember Schubert!*". . .

It was during the dinner hour that Ross had a brief exchange of words with Graygortch.

He had contrived to drop into the master's study at that time, to make sure the tray of foods tempted Graygortch's appetite, Dr. Zimmerman and Fantella having cooperated in its preparation.

The old man talked as he ate.

"Bradford, this attack that you and the others fear does not worry me."

"No?"

"I am confident you will repel it. That is your job now, for all the years to come."

"You honor me with your confidence," said Ross.

"Attacks will come and go. But you will always stand firm, championing the cause that I know you represent. In your simple language, *the cause of evil.*"

Ross, drew a long painful breath before responding.

"But suppose—" his voice grew tight, "suppose that Jag Rouse and his gang should fight their way past us? What if they should rush the castle and find *you*—unprotected? . . . What if they should *kill* you?"

The old man might not have heard, for he did not look up but went on slowly plying his fork with his thin brown fingers. Ross felt beads of perspiration gathering on the backs of his own hands. His question had plunged too deep. Could it be answered only with hard silence?

"I may die," said Graygortch, "before the attack comes. Very soon I will transfer my powers to Vivian. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"You must both be ready to accompany me up the spiral stairs for the next storm. I will give you no advance warning. *Be ready.*"

Ross nodded. For a moment the old man's eyes met his in a luminous glare that began to spread like two balls of fire. A sickening sensation struck through Ross, but only for an instant. Then the luminous glare faded and the sensation was gone.

"Leave me now," said Graygortch.

"Very well, your honor."

AS ROSS moved toward the door he noticed that the old man laid down the fork, let his head bow deeply until it came to rest on the crook of his bony arm. The low rattling of a sigh announced that Graygortch was dropping off to sleep . . .

Ross went straight to Dr. Zimmerman.

Together they slipped back to the closed door of Graygortch's study. For several minutes they listened. At last there were sounds of the old man's moving about, dressing, mumbling to himself.

"Now we'll go to the old living room," Dr. Zimmerman whispered.

There were more minutes of waiting. Everything was quiet in and about the living room, for Ross had seen to it that the corridor bells were disconnected, and Fantella had stationed dependable maids to divert all traffic.

Presently the long shadow of Graygortch moved down the hallway and his slow footsteps swished along the deep carpet.

It was the Bill Graygortch of the old days who tottered in, a tired old man more asleep than awake. He wore bedroom slippers, and the collar of his heavy white sweater was pushed up

high around his gaunt brown throat.

The leathery webs of wrinkles were gathered close around his half-closed eyes, but he held his head high with a grace and dignity that was striking in a man so feeble.

He moved over toward the fireplace, stretched his hands toward it, then chuckled pleasantly and drew his hands away.

Ross crouched back in his chair to remain unseen. Obviously the old man was sharper to his surrounding tonight than he had been in a previous sleep-walk, for he had realized that the dead ashes in the fireplace were not a glowing fire.

He crossed slowly to the right side of the fireplace, eased himself into the old chair, his hands rested limply on the table of checkers.

Vivian had entered the room without attracting his attention, and she drew up a chair close beside Ross. A moment later Fantella followed, planted her plump knees in the carpet, rested her elbows on the arm of Vivian's chair, and watched. None of the three observers dared to whisper. They hardly dared breathe.

NOW Dr. Zimmerman sauntered down the right side of the room and spoke casually.

"Good evening, Bill."

"Doc, I'm pretty tired tonight," Graygortch droned in a low relaxed voice. "But I'll play you one more game."

"Pretty tired, Bill?" The doctor seated himself.

"I'll have to go soon, Zim," said Graygortch. "Can't hold on much longer. . . . You move first."

For several minutes they played in silence. Ross could see the doctor's fingers tremble. Old sentiments were pounding through the silver-haired man's pulses.

"Seems to me," said Graygortch, "that we haven't played a game for quite a spell."

"It's been some time, Bill," said the doctor, biting his lips.

Graygortch lifted his head. "What makes your eyes so watery tonight, Doc? Something troubling you?"

"I don't think so." Zimmerman touched his eyes with a handkerchief.

"It isn't like you to be troubled," said Graygortch. "Anything I can do?"

"There might be," said Zimmerman. "It's about you, Bill. You're not yourself sometimes. Do you know that?"

Graygortch pushed his thin fingers up the side of his face thoughtfully.

"Yes, I know it. I guess everyone knows it, don't they?"

"What's it like, Bill?"

Graygortch frowned. "It isn't at all uncomfortable. It caught me just when I meant to die. I was ready, you know. I'm still waiting."

"I thought you *were* dying," said Zimmerman.

The old man nodded. "I would have. But this thing moved in on me. It forced me to keep on living—"

"*What* thing?"

"This—this—well, I don't know what you'd call it. It's not something you talk about. There aren't any words for it. It's—it's just there."

"What does it feel like? How does it act?"

"It just takes me over, makes me do things and say things—strange things—things that haven't anything to do with me."

"Do you think it's something that's been growing up inside you all these years?"

"No—no." Graygortch tapped a checker on the table emphatically. "It's got nothing to do with me. Rather, it

has borrowed my body—simply taken me over—"

"Why?"

"I don't know. I don't know why it does any of the things it does. But I know it's a deadly thing—harmful—that's it—harmful through and through—without any principle—"

"Do you think it's someone else's spirit?"

GRAYGORTCH passed his hand across his forehead uneasily. "I never understood talk about spirits. . . .It's not a person. It's too big and powerful—like tons of dynamite all packed in one little cartridge: *me.*"

"Is it in you now—all the time?"

Graygortch shook his head. "When I have to sleep it seems to pass away from me, and just now—well, I must be half asleep. Anyway I had almost forgot it when we started this game. But it'll come back, and when it does I'm just *nothing.* Nothing but putty, doing its will, carrying it up the stairs, talking for it, forcing its plans on Vivian and all the others—"

"And you don't approve of its plans?"

"Doc, I'd rather go through all the fires of hell than—*what's the meaning of these senseless questions?"* Graygortch suddenly stiffened and his long brown fingers quickly clamped into defiant fists.

"I'm trying to help you, Bill. If we can only get this thing straightened out—"

"I detest talking to strangers. *Leave me."*

"Bill!" Zimmerman cried. "What happened? What's come over you?"

A luminous glare blazed from the old man's eyes.

"I don't know you. I don't want to know you. Will you leave me or shall I call a guard? . . . *GET OUT!!!"*

CHAPTER XXIV

NOT until the door of Graygortch's study closed did anyone speak.

Then it was a maid, entering from the hallway, who broke the electric silence.

"One of the guards wants to see the chief," she said. "It's urgent."

Ross crossed to the South Pole Plaza and found Pudgy pacing and biting his nails.

"There's been a killing, chief, out on the upper trail."

"Who?"

"Pollock Kell, on sentinel duty. Right through the heart. And his partner got one through the arm. I sent a couple men out to bring them in."

"Put the wounded man on the porch cot. I'll get a doctor on the job," Ross said. "Were there many of them?"

"Only a pair of scummy looking scouts. They high-tailed it back over the mountain, the rats."

"Okay, Pudgy. You've got some footracing to do," Ross snapped. "Tell the guards on the upper Flinfiord to blow up the foot-bridge. Send Block and Taury down to the lower ford. Have Slab issue extra ammunition all around. If any more scouting parties show up, cut loose with your machine guns."

"I've gotcha, chief."

"And one thing more. I want to talk to the seven top-ranking guards in exactly thirty minutes. Can you get them here that soon?"

"Yes, sir, but what if the whole East Village gang invades—"

"They won't chance an attack before pitch dark. That gives us an hour."

"Okay, chief." Pudgy chased off into the twilight.

By the time the two sailors reached the porch with their wounded comrade,

Ross had succeeded in enlisting the services of Dr. Zimmerman. The silver-haired man was badly shaken over his encounter with Graygortch, but the job of treating a bullet wound helped him get a grip on himself. He went to work with a will.

"I've had plenty of this to do over in East Village," he said, working over the unconscious sailor. "Knife wounds, bullet holes, and concussions are a specialty with me. Those East Villagers are a hard lot."

"Just like my guards," said Ross. They've all graduated from the underworld in answer to Graygortch's call. The lucky ones got jobs here at the castle, the overflow turned away disgruntled and settled in East Village. All in all, I think there'd be a better chance of reforming the ones that have had jobs, even if they have been closer to the evil—"

Ross saw that his reference to Graygortch was disturbing to the doctor.

"It's never easy to make a man over," Ross continued.

"It's usually impossible," said the doctor.

"Unless you can change his whole outlook on life," Ross amended. "We used to have some encouraging results with the no-accounts who came to the Transient Hotel. . . . Your patient's regaining consciousness, Doctor. Keep the good work going."

ROSS glanced at his watch. Three of his seven corporals were already waiting for him on the parade grounds. But he still had fifteen minutes. He scurried through the South Pole Plaza and down the ringing corridors in search of Vivian. He met her coming from her room, and caught her in his arms.

"I had to have a word with you, *Mrs. Bradford!*" he grinned.

"Ross! Don't you dare call me that," she blazed, "unless you mean it."

"And how I mean it! Listen, honey. I'm dead sure that devil Jag Rouse has picked tonight."

"To attack?"

"Yes. If he does, we're in for a serious time. He's got twice our number of men. And we can't be sure our men will stand up under fire—*for us.*"

Vivian's fingers tightened in Ross' hands.

"I've thought of that," she said. "If the sailors knew you were hurling them at Rouse to hold him off—*while you and I slipped away*—"

"I'll take care of that." Ross' eyes snapped. "I'm taking a chance with those birds anyway you look at it. They think I'm a master killer—and they're going to keep thinking it. But if they're willing to fight our battle, I've got an obligation to them."

"You're a square shooter, Mr. Bradford," said Vivian. "But I think you're fixing to get yourself shot."

"I want you to leave, Vivian. At once. There's no sense in staying any longer on account of your uncle. You saw him slip back into his madness a few minutes ago. *It's an unnatural madness.* It's nothing that we *humans* can cope with."

"Ross!"

"Vivian, you've got to cancel him from your mind—"

"I'm packed, Ross," Vivian said quietly. "What next?"

"Get Jimpson's rowboat. Tell Jimpson to go with you—and Hank –Susan—Fantella, too. The five of you can make it. Row back to the fishermen's village and wait there for an outbound boat—"

"And leave you here alone?" the girl wailed.

"Never mind about me. Take this address." He scribbled a New York

street number on a scrap of envelope. "I may meet you at the fishermen's village, but *don't wait.* Take the first boat either to England or Iceland, and from there to the States. My name will be good for passages for all of you."

THE sound of footsteps slipping along the carpeted corridor caused Ross and Vivian to turn. The steps stopped short of the corner as if to avoid ringing the bell. Then the faces of Sue Smith and Hank Switcher peered around.

"Hssst!" said Hank. "Talleyho!"

"Are the decks clear?" Sue whispered.

Ross motioned them to come on. "It's a private conference but we'll include you. In fact, we need you."

Sue pointed to the sailor outfit Hank was wearing. "The boy friend thinks he's disguised. Isn't he a case?"

"You'd better add a few scars to your face, Hank," said Vivian, "if you want to pass for a regular."

"And you'd better lay low, disguise or no disguise" said Ross. "I'm in a tight spot with these sailors tonight. Will they fight or won't they? If they see me fraternizing with you—"

"They'll fight us both," Hank muttered. "All right, I'll lay low. And I'll add the scars. Any more advice?"

"Straighten your shoulders," said Sue, "and they'll never suspect you're Hank Switcher. . . . What's the dope, Ross?"

"I'm sending you three on to the fishermen's village. Also Fantella and Jimpson. I've given full instructions to Vivian—so be off."

"Just a minute, my dear Mr. Bradford," said Sue. "Since when do you give instructions to me? I want to stay and see the show."

"You can't. Listen, my friend," Ross snapped his fingers in a way that meant business, "I've got a tough bunch of criminals to handle, and I don't want to waste any orders on civilized people. . . .Hank, see that Sue goes with you."

"What ever you say," said Hank with a salute, "but I'm still all blisters from rowboating. What's more, that fellow Jimpson saw a Nazi sub skimming past the island tonight."

Ross' eyes narrowed. So the long-threatened sea war was moving on Flinfiord at last. In all probability the news that this was to become a British air and submarine base had already leaked through to the Nazis. All the more reason that Ross must stay, fight this power of evil to the last ditch.

"Take your chances on the subs—and blisters." Ross glanced at his watch. "Good luck, folks. My sailors are waiting."

"Don't worry about us," said Sue. "I'll turn my gun over to Hank. He shoots first and inquires about the reward afterward. . . . Oh, pardon me."

"Yeah, pardon her," said Hank, "for talking to you while you're kissing . . . Skip it. . . ."

OUT on the parade ground Ross faced seven hard-faced sailors who listened to him eagerly. They were sizing him up, he knew that. This was his first leadership under fire. But as he told them his plan for meeting the Rouse gang, they nodded their agreement, nudging each other whenever they caught an implication of his vast criminal achievements.

"Finally," he said, "there's this I must add. You corporals and you men are fighting for me. I'm fighting for you. You know why. Every man of us would rather bag big game. Don't think that I've forgot how we came here. None of us have any principles. We'd murder each other if we hadn't

any bigger jobs to do. But Jag Rouse and his East Villagers are as good as handpicked for their treachery. And your ex-captain, I'll wager, is still in line for Graygortch's thirteenth discipleship. So let 'em come. We've got pickin's."

"Let 'em come," the seven corporals agreed.

Across the parade ground Pudgy came racing out of the darkness.

"They're coming!" he yelled. "Theyre a mile out of the village, marching up the mountain trail, a whole mob of 'em!"

"Let 'em come!" Ross snapped. "No alarms, though. They mustn't know *we* know. . . . Okay, men. Down to the river ford!"

CHAPTER XXV

HANK SWITCHER raced up and down the basement stairs at least a dozen times, according to his own count. But nowhere could he find Jimpson. He searched the sub-basement caverns with a flashlight in each hand. He crawled back through the waste chute to the basement level, re-searched the power-plant chamber, peered under pipes and around the glass-encased turbines and generators. But there was no Jimpson.

As a matter of fact Jimpson wouldn't have risked hiding in the power room, for there were too many high-tension wires for comfort, even for an engineer. Hank noted the signs warning that super-charged wires lined the glass cases over every vital instrument. This place wasn't to be tampered with.

By the time he gave Jimpson up and returned to the rest of the party, Susan Smith was gone.

"She's as jumpy as a cat," Hank mumbled. "Maybe she's gone on down to the boat."

"How could she know der trail?" Fantella asked. "Dot Jimpson iss der only vun—"

"Then he's gone down with her."

But this supposition was a mistake. It took half an hour of steep climbing to check it. But when Hank, Vivian and Fantella reached the water's edge, puffing and panting from carrying their luggage, they found no one.

Hank tossed aside the camouflage of limbs and packed the cases in the rear of the rowboat.

"Orders iss orders," said Fantella, getting into the boat. "Meester Bradford said go. Ve'd better make hay while der sun don't shine."

"I hate to leave them," Vivian said. "Hank, do you think Sue will be all right?"

"We'd better trot back up the trail," Hank growled.

"The least we could do is leave a note for Ross and tell him how many of us got away. You wait here, Fantella."

Most of an hour was lost in the climb, and by this time some big trouble had broken loose somewhere across the uplands. Hank could hear the rattle of machine guns and the crack of rifles from the upper reaches of the river.

"You boy friend knew what he was about, sending you away," Hank muttered. "Hurry and write that note."

"There," said Vivian. "I'll slip it under his door. If we find either of them down at the boat when we get back, I've told him I'll leave another note there."

"I can't figure where in the hell she could have gone. But she's out for a story, and she may be over at the river counting machine gun bullets. Come on, let's get out of here."

HANK caught Vivian's hand and they went chasing through the

castle, heedless of telltale bells at every turn.

But at the South Pole Plaza under the big tower something brought them to a dead stop. That something was Graygortch.

"Vivian!"

The old man's voice echoed like a low roar of thunder through the spiral staircases.

"Vivian, I was looking for you." The old man reached out with his steel fingers, motioned to her to come. *"And Bradford—where is he? I told him to be ready!"*

His words shot out like brittle steel bullets. There was angry impatience in his eyes. Hank Switcher caught it all, and the chill of impending doom half-paralyzed him.

"Come on, Vivian," he whispered, trying to pull her away. "Don't listen to him. Don't!"

The girl, strangely, seemed to be fastened to her tracks. Far from yielding to Hank's lead, she rather held him with her, forced him to submit to the same terrifying hypnotism that had caught her. For now the old man's luminous glare was casting its spell.

"Come with me," said Graygortch. *"Both of you."*

Hank cast about for an avenue of escape. There were plenty of them, for numerous halls led off the South Pole Plaza, and there were no guards to turn him back.

But Vivian required him, and he had no thought of deserting her. Still, he wondered if Graygortch realized his mistake. He blurted, "I'm not Bradford, you know."

"Bradford has forfeited his right," the old man said solemnly. "He should have been here. I have no time to wait. I'll nullify his marriage, and you shall take his place."

"No—no, I couldn't do that," Hank protested. "I wouldn't think of it."

"Don't underestimate yourself. You may be only a common sailor," said Graygortch, "but you are now appointed to be Vivian's husband, the chief of the guards, the protector of the castle."

"No—no. I've no right—"

"Come with me." Graygortch motioned them to the spiral stairs.

The first gong rang out and the timbers shuddered with the vibrations.

Now Hank moved along beside Vivian and her uncle in forbidden ascent.

"This is a new privilege," said Graygortch. "Never before has this sacred ascent been graced by anyone but myself. But this is my last climb. From now on these stairs are yours."

"Uncle Bill, I'm not going with you. I can't. Let me go back. Please—I can't!"

"You're too modest, child. Make up your minds to it, you're entitled to all this."

"No, Uncle Bill—"

"Hush, child. These mysteries are yours to consume."

BY THAT time Hank realized it was more than the old man's verbal persuasion urging them up the stairs. He was exerting a bizarre force upon them —something intangible, subtle, yet as demanding as the pull of a steel chain. When Hank tried to resist it, he found his feet nevertheless moving forward, keeping pace with the slow measured steps of Graygortch.

At each landing—*Boom!* Like a giant clock the great gong notes rang out, no two of them the same. People as far as the villages must know that Graygortch was climbing.

The massive black draperies were having their effect upon Hank by this time, clothing him with a weird sense of engulfing doom.

"Lights along the drapes," he whispered to Vivian.

"From his eyes?" she asked.

The more Hank watched, the more this seemed to be the case. Those two dull red circles of light, like dim headlights, were evidently emanating from Graygortch's human eyes.

They neared the top. An automatic pistol was in Hank's perspiring hand —the same little pearl-handled number that he'd held the time a swift turn of circumstance made him do murder.

The eighth and final gong rang out. They were at the top. Hank took in the place at a glance. He'd been here before, but not on official business. The place was not so bleak or empty as on that day when he and Ross had taken refuge here.

On that day, he recalled, the machine guns had clattered from the lower roofs, cutting a spray of chips and dust from the massive stone windows. Tonight the machine guns were in action again and their echo from the headwaters of the Flinfiord set up a dull rattling dance here in the huge tower top.

The thirteen big rectangular windows seemed even more vast with the night's blackness staring through them. And now, as the gigantic webbed disc coasted downward the whole black sky formed an opaque lid to the open tower top.

Then a bomber slipped through the sky and Hank regained his lost dimension—the vertical depth of this immeasurable universe—the bigness of sky that dwarfs the earth and everything on it.

These were strange thoughts for Hank Switcher, and yet appropriate, for he was uncertain whether the fates would let him go on as a part of this earth. Or whether they were about to snatch him up into some unearthly, unknown realm.

His thoughts came down to earth with a thud. The dim colored lights of the instruments revealed two eavesdroppers peeking over the tower top.

ONE was Susan Smith. She had smeared black on her face to avoid catching the light, protection enough to take a chance on Graygortch's dim eyesight. Her face was showing over the very top of the tower, and Hank knew she must be supported by a loop of rope.

A few feet beyond her was Jimpson, lying on this topmost edge of the circular wall, his dark-clad body and twisted legs quite visible.

A roof climb had brought them here, and Hank realized that Sue Smith's ambitions to follow through for a story knew no bounds. But what must a climb of this sort have cost the brown-skinned little engineer with the mud-chain legs?

"Do you see them?"

Vivian whispered it almost inaudibly in Hank's ear. Hank crossed his fingers. It was a good time to keep them crossed.

Graygortch now seated himself in the small semicircular bench at the table of control instruments. He motioned Vivian and Hank to join him. When the three sat side by side, Graygortch again pressed a lever and the vast webbed disc lowered still farther. It stopped with its circle of thirteen cylindrical shafts pointing through the thirteen windows.

At once it began. The thirteen crystal guns threw out a spray of thirteen mammoth light rays that inflamed the heavens far and wide.

The light rays broke off—and a violent crash of thunder tore loose with ear-shattering fury. The tower rocked and shuddered. The whole castle must

have vibrated like a doll house.

Again the lights flashed out, and now the deadly roar of thunder was matched by the ghastly whine of high winds. From far below came the sounds of a heavy sea pounding against the crags.

Again and again the violent light smashed out into the heavens, and each time the earth groaned and trembled more violently. Hank heard Vivian cry out.

"It's the end of everything!"

And through the next lowering of the earthquake's roar he caught her terrified beseechings.

"Ross! Ross! Where are you?"

In those minutes of mounting horror Hank threw the weight of his courage into a single effort. His hand froze on the little pearl-handled pistol, thrust it at Graygortch's body, and he shouted for the storm to be turned off.

Then he tried to pull the trigger. But those hard, evil, luminous eyes that he had seen before now expanded before him, paralyzing him, damning him, immersing him in a whirlpool of hate.

THE paralysis held Hank to the very fingertips. His arms were cold steel, the same as the gun. He was being swept away by the madness. . . . Vivian was shrieking. . . .

Then Hank caught sight of the colored lights approaching the center of the vast webbed wheels They were bringing in the sensations of violent evil with their gradual approach. Segment by segment the network of metal and crystal grew bright to the point of blindness.

Graygortch was trying to bring those lights all the way to the center. How, Hank did not know. But against the screaming winds the old man was shouting his intentions.

At first Hank couldn't catch the weird message. He was too much overwhelmed by the nature of those thirteen, brilliant, blinding blots of light—*for each blot of light was a face, slowly coming closer—closer—closer!*

Nearly all of the thirteen faces were coming clear, like visions through lenses slowly coming into focus.

The black mustached visage of Adolph Hitler was unmistakable. And others from the high ranks of Nazi war lords were shining like angels of evil through the blazing spots.

But one of the thirteen did not come clear, and Hank saw that Vivian, too, was watching it curiously. It was then that the words of Graygortch took on meaning.

"When they all come in," he cried the words in a slow distinct rhythm, "I'll transfer the power to you, Vivian." The girl nodded. She must have known, from the horrified countenances of Susan Smith and Jimpson, that they understood the hideous fate ahead for her.

"The thirteenth is yet to be chosen," Graygortch sang out. "I must force the rival candidates to come to a decision. . . . All thirteen must find their way to me completely before I blend their powers—"

"Blend them—how? the girl called.

"In *you,* Vivian. . . . I am through. In a moment it will be all yours. . . . Your heritage But first—"

Now the thirteenth blaze of light began to take form. For a moment Hank thought it was going to be a handsome cleancut visage on the order of Ross Bradford's. Then the features thickened and the head grew to resemble Jag Rouse. Still, the details did not come clear.

"One of you," Graygortch called out, "must win over the other. I command you bring your contest to a close."

HANK passed his gaze over the gallery of evil faces, one by one, and

came back again to the undetermined thirteenth.

"Rouse, if you succeed in killing Bradford," Graygortch shouted into the screeching winds, "I will make you the disciple. . . . Bradford, if you kill Rouse, you will be my disciple, to take your place with Hitler . . . Goebbels . . ."

The old man went down the line of twelve, calling names. Some of them Hank knew. Others were even of unknown nationality. But whether obscure or far famed, they were Graygortch's disciples of death—the pick of the earth's men of evil.

"Come, come, Rouse . . . Bradford. . . . Let's have an end of one or the other of you," Graygortch called. "I see you locked in a bitter struggle. . . . I'm waiting. . . . Which one of you is most fit to taste the blended powers of my disciples and myself?"

Hank saw the utter horror in Vivian's face. She was past screaming. But a sickening realization closed her eyes when she knew—from the hint of smile on Graygortch's lips—that a decision for the thirteenth place had been reached.

Hank glanced up toward the two amazed onlookers—*in time to see the twisted form of Jimpson leap*—

No accidental fall could have dropped Jimpson into the center of that blazing disc. It was a deliberate leap, achieved by the superior muscles of that wall-climbing little cripple—

Jimpson landed squarely across the instrument table. If he had been a band of naked copper the flash couldn't have been any more dazzling.

One immense white flare jumped across the connections. Hank heard a sharp crackle, caught a glimpse of Jimpson being incinerated.

The explosion came and went in that instantaneous flash and crackle. Then it was gone—and with it went every light. The tower—the stairs—the entire castle and grounds were plunged into pitch blackness. Blackness and silence.

CHAPTER XXVI

OVER swishing pine needles toward the roaring waters of the Flinfiord the castle army plodded.

"They'll outnumber us two or three to one," Ross reiterated, "but we'll beat them to the punch."

"Damned right," muttered Stazell, one of the machine gunners.

From all appearances Ross had his handful of men in the right spirit for stalling an enemy.

A few minutes earlier he had finished selling his seven corporals on his plan of action. Except for a slight uneasiness about Stazell, he had no misgivings. But the machine gunner was the same man who had been Jag Rouse's main aid during the sailor's attack on Hank and Ross in the tower. Ross would keep his eye on Stazell.

But now, as they forded the Flinfiord, Stazell was seconding the new chief's suggestions heartily—almost too heartily. Ross wasn't sure whether that was good or bad.

There were only thirty-six in the party. The remainder were on watch at vital points.

A speedy march brought the three dozen men to the point on the upper Flinfiord where a small footbridge had been blown up a short time before.

The valley-like approach on the far side of the footbridge was a natural trap, a narrow V-shaped pass that funnelled toward the footbridge.

"Here's where we'll bottle them," Ross whispered. "Plant one machine gun here on the lowside. Take the other one half-way up the slope of Flat-

Jog Rouse flew upward as Bradford kicked—straight into the deadly beam

Stump mountain."

"When do we shoot, chief?" asked Stazell.

"Wait till they get up to the bridge and find it gone," said Ross. "The instant they begin to backwater, our two scouts, planted over on the castle-side of the river, will start a fire in some brush. Get it?"

"They'll think we're still on our own side of the river?"

"Right. But here we are, planted to mow them from two sides as soon as the light's on them. Vordoff, your machine gun will catch their front so no man will get across the river. Stazell, you'll fire straight at the center of the mob."

Pudgy came, then, with a report from the scouts watching the east slope. The attackers were ten minutes away.

By the time Ross' rifle men were ambushed, the low thudding of feet could be heard like an approaching herd of cattle.

"Company halt!" came Rouse's important bark. "Run ahead, you four scouts, and check on that footbridge. Look for a plant of dynamite."

IT WAS hard to tell how well Jag Rouse's men were obeying. There wasn't a light among them, and under the black sky Ross could see them only as a shadowy mass creeping along the trail. Separate heads and bodies were indistinguishable. The mass was as vague as a black cloud drifting along the midnight horizon.

But within a few minutes the low voices again sounded over the tread of feet.

"Where's Rouse?"

"Here. What's up?"

"The damned bridge is down."

"The hell it is."

"It's been blasted."

"Goddammit."

That tone in the ex-captain's voice had a familiar ring for Ross. He could picture the irate face contorted with a snarl. It was a moment of indecision for the East Villagers—the very time for the sentinels on the other side of the river to start the fires.

But Stazell and his machine-gunners lurking on the upper flank of the pass didn't wait for the fires. Contrary to orders they jumped the gun and began firing. Machine-gun bullets clattered somewhere over Ross' head, and a shower of pine needles rained around him.

"Down, men!" Ross hissed. "That damned idiot!"

"He's firing on *us!* Well, I'll be—"

The sailor next to Ross choked, uttered a sickening cry, struck the ground with a thump.

"Down, down, men! Flatten and open fire!"

The bullets began to fly thick and fast, and with them an equally violent volley of profanity. That damned Stazell and his machine-gun unit had turned traitor. The treachery caught the sailors in the gizzard.

But now machine gun was answering machine gun. And a good share of those first rifle shots, Ross knew, were aimed at Stazell and his nest.

"That got 'em, the devils!" some sailor barked, as the upper machine gun went silent.

Now the shadowy mass of invaders was stippled with the flashing light of their return fire. Jag Rouse's growl could be heard amid the roar. He was shouting to his men to spread out, take to cover.

Suddenly from across the river the fire flamed up, spread along the bank toward the jagged heap of debris that had been a bridge. The ranks of the invaders came into view. They were in a panic. They dashed all directions

to get out of the light, spilled over each other.

Ross' sailors couldn't have asked for easier targets. They unleashed terrific rifle fire, and shouted with savage glee to see the East Village army wither.

But Jag Rouse was barking orders and beginning to get results. The logical escape was a ravine that wound up the side of the lofty Flat-Stump mountain. Its tortuous curves showed black under the light of leaping flames.

Now Jag Rouse's voice boomed from the vicinity of that natural trench and his panic-stricken army crawled, tumbled, and slithered after him.

"Right on their tails, men," Ross ordered. "Fast. Fast. Don't let them get set."

The sailors plunged across the trail like devils out of hell.

"Spread out!" Ross yelled. "Pour it on them."

HERE and there a sailor dropped. For the moment the light was against them. But Ross plunged along the side of the ravine, making every pistol shot count. His boldness broke the path. The sailors bounded over rocks and fallen trees to keep up with him. Once Ross thought he heard a distant gong. But the clamor of the fight kept the valley roaring.

The enemy had its choice of ascending the ravine or falling in their tracks. They did some of both. Ross' sailors leaped over dead bodies. Up the steep mountain the battle moved—a full half mile of treacherous climbing.

At this distance the firelight was too dim to play advantages for either party.

But Ross could see where the clash was leading. Right on the table-flat top of the mountain.

"Not too fast, men," he cried. "Thin 'em out but don't hurry them."

As long as it was bullets, with the enemy on the run, well and good. But Ross knew he was still outnumbered. And if his men closed in for a hand-to-hand clash, the superior enemy would find its advantage.

And that was almost sure to happen on the table-flat mountain-top.

A flash of curiosity shot through Ross' mind here in the heat of battle—curiosity over this geological monstrosity that had always reminded him of a huge ragged pyramid with its point sliced off clean.

Now Jag Rouse's voice was coming from that table top and his men were scrambling up over the edge out of view. It would be dark up on the level floor—

Suddenly Jag Rouse, bellowing like a mad bull, flew back down over the edge into view. He was waving an arm wildly. Ross thought a bullet must have got him.

No, he must be calling for a counter attack.

"Come back, you fools!" the ex-captain shouted. He had lost his gun. He seemed to have lost his head as well. "Come back off of that! Don't go up there!"

The East Village army hadn't been conspicuous for its obedience at any time, and now there were only three or four of the retreating figures who crept back to the edge. There they were face to face with the oncoming sailors. Telling shots greeted them.

Guns were rapidly going dead on the sailors, but that didn't check their rush. For these empty guns were perfectly good clubs and they were in the mood for guardsmen's hockey.

Consequently there was a rapid change, as the last of the East Villagers neared the edge of the table-top, from gunfire to club swinging and head bashing.

Ross had run out of ammunition. The

moment of hand-to-hand had come. He picked his man.

JAG ROUSE was still waving and bellowing like something gone mad. He had jumped down from the edge of the square-cut summit, stationed himself ten feet below it on a bit of ledge. In the dim light he was only a shadow, but his huge frame and high shoulders marked him, and his wild roar invited a fight.

Ross flung an empty revolver at him. It grazed his shoulder. The big man ducked. He must have caught a telling silhouette of Ross against the distant fires.

"So it's you, Bradford," the ex-captain growled. "By God, this is what I want."

He crouched to spring.

But at that instant it happened. A sky-full of blinding fire shot over Ross' head.

"The storm!"

Several men shouted it at once. Ross knew without being told. And he knew now how this mountain-top had been sliced off so clean.

An instant after the dazzling ubiquitous flash the blackness cut back as blinding as the light had been.

But Jag Rouse had gauged his distance for a jump in that moment of brilliance. Now he plunged, and the weight of him struck Ross squarely. Ross went down under the impact.

Then for minutes they were struggling like two beasts, pounding, kicking, biting, tearing at each other's throats. And all the while the magnificent blaze of deadly light was filling the sky overhead.

Now and again the earth rocked and groaned. Wind, thunder, and now dashes of rain bore down upon the mountains with awful suddenness. Now Ross was tumbling, now he was up again, scrambling over purple rock, hurling himself at Jag Rouse with all his power. Now he was stunned by a flying rock. He staggered, catching the side of his head. For an instant that vast fan of light from the distant castle was less blinding than the dizzy whirl in his brain.

His consciousness wavered, then came back sharply.

He was being carried bodily.

Jag Rouse had him in a crushing grip and was dragging him *toward the summit.*

YES, Jag Rouse knew the meaning of that dazzling ceiling of light. No wonder he had tried to get his men off the table-top. It was the deadly beam that had sliced the point off the mountain—and here it was, within ten feet of them, waiting to disintegrate any substance that cut through its surface.

"You're gonna get it, damn you, just like my army got it," the big man snarled. "You'll fry before you can wink. Yes, and you'll—"

Jag Rouse caught a hard blow in the mouth. Ross had him spitting teeth from that one. And crumbling from a kick of the knee. And slipping off his grip from a rapid follow-through of fists.

Ross fell free, struggled to catch his footing, sprawled to the sloping ground. As he fell his arm flew up—the point of his finger barely touched the knife-edge surface *and was gone.*

Some reflex action made him touch the nipped finger to his mouth, and Jag Rouse must have seen.

"Got you, didn't it!" the steaming, snarling ex-captain rasped. "Just a *taste.* Now you know what's coming."

Before Ross could pick himself off the sloping ground the big man came plunging.

Ross crouched to his side, then

whirled to his back and caught the big man's violent lunge full on his feet. Then his legs straightened like the springing of a catapult, and he threw the lumbering weight clear of his feet.

The huge man shot up over Ross' head *into the blinding beam.*

He did not come down. Not a shred of clothing, not a hair, not a drop of blood sifted down out of that ceiling of light. *Ex-captain Jag Rouse had disintegrated.*

CHAPTER XXVII

ROSS was still staring upward, his eyes half shaded, when the blinding streaks of sky went black.

For minutes his eyes continued to see those giant wheel-spokes gleaming, reaching out from the distant castle tower. But the blackness had come back for good this time.

His army collected itself on a bank above the ravine. Five of the original seven corporals were on hand to reorganize their squads and gloat over their victory.

A cautious examination of the table-top summit of Flat-Stump mountain revealed nothing but empty space. The East Villagers who had taken refuge there had met the same fate as their captain.

"Graygortch must be on our side," the corporals boasted. "We haven't lost our evil touch."

"We go for big game," said Ross, as he passed his praise among the assembling squads. "Jag Rouse *almost* pulled down that discipleship—I could tell he was *almost* there—"

"How?"

"Strange as it may sound, Graygortch was talking to both of us during that fight. I could hear his words. He was hurling us against each other—but in the end it was his death beam that swallowed up Jag Rouse."

The men stood in awe. Their new chief had given them action the way they liked it. And he had a pull with Graygortch that set him apart from common men. They would follow a high-class criminal like this through any battle he'd lead them into.

"You're the thirteenth disciple yourself, then," said Pudgy proudly.

Ross scowled. "I'm not sure till I see Graygortch. I've got to hurry back now. You men take care of your less fortunate brothers."

A thousand questions were leaping through Ross' mind as he approached the castle.

Strangely everything was perfectly dark. Not even a thin gleam of light from the smaller towers. Nothing like this had ever occurred before.

"Who is dot I hear?" came a well known female voice from the rear walk.

"Fantella! What are you doing here?" He hurried across the yard to meet her. It was too dark to read her expression, but she was chuffing like an engine and her voice hinted exasperation.

"Vait till I get my vind," she puffed.

"You were supposed to go with Vivian and the others in the boat."

"Yah?"

"*Yah,*" said Ross, helping her up the steps. "If you'd obeyed my orders you'd be over in the village now, safe."

"Yah?" Fantella's voice was on a sarcastic edge.

"All right, you think you're safe here because we whipped Rouse. Well, you're not. It was the storm that whipped him. Do you know what that means? Bombers will be heading over us shortly to smash this place to smithereens."

"Yah? Vat could I do about it?"

"You could have gone with Vivian—"

"Leesten to me, Meester Bradford,"

Fantella exploded. "I'fe been vaiting and vaiting and vaiting down in dot boat and der more I vait, der more nobody comes."

"What? You mean they didn't go?"

"Der last ting I knew," the old lady sputtered disgustedly, "Vivian and Hank vas climbing up der trail to leaf der note because Jimpson and dot Smith girl vas gone."

Ross gasped. If Vivian had shared that storm ritual, as the old man had planned, there was no telling what had happened. Possibly death—possibly something far worse—

"Find some candles, Fantella—Wait. Someone's coming with a light."

A flashlight swung through the corridor. Two men were approaching —the silver-haired doctor, and the curt young British agent. No bells sounded as they passed the inner avenues of the castle. Ross pressed an electric switch, but there were no lights.

"The power plant's gone dead, Bradford," Dr. Zimmerman called as Ross hurried toward him. "That was the worst storm ever."

"By far," the British agent commented. "I came very nearly not getting here, but I—"

"Give me your light," Ross snapped. He fairly snatched it from the doctor's hand and went rushing toward the South Pole Plaza. *"Vivian!"*

He stopped, listened. The clatter of his companion's footsteps was all he heard. Fantella was at his heels, and Zimmerman and the British agent were not far behind.

"Vivian. *VIVIAN!"* Ross shouted. "Are you up there with Graygortch?"

Everyone stopped to listen. Ross' voice echoed round and round through the spiral stairs.

"What's the matter?" the doctor demanded, trying to keep pace. "Is that Rouse gang moving on the castle—"

"We did them in," Ross said. "But I should have been here . . . *VIVIAN!"*

The chill of terror in his voice was contagious. He started up the stairs three at a time. Fantella and the two men followed in his wake. He hesitated on the first landing long enough to call back a warning.

"I'd get *out* of here if I were you. We're due for tons of bombs, after that storm, or I miss my guess. And that's not all. I think Graygortch *has done it!"* Ross flew up the stairs.

"Wait, Bradford," the British agent bounded up beside him and the two of them took the stairs together three at a time. "I'm holding off those bombs—"

"Yes?"

"Until you folks have had time to evacuate. In fact, I've urged the government to save the castle—"

"That's good." Ross didn't slacken his speed.

THE British agent lost ground but kept up his end of the conversation, gasping as he shouted on the run.

"I've tried to reason with the doctor. We could spare the castle if we could remove Graygortch. Put him in a safe place behind bars."

"I suppose the Doc wouldn't hear of it?" Ross roared back, now half a flight ahead.

"No," the agent panted. "But he had another idea . . . Keep the old man doped with pills . . . He says it makes the old fellow safe until the effect wears off."

"I'm doubtful," Ross said, waiting a moment on the sixth landing for the agent to catch up. "I think that foreign *something* that lives in Graygortch will find a way of breaking out and doing deadly mischief as long as he lives—and then—"

"Then what?"

"Then—" Ross' words came down to a fearful whisper, "then—as long as *she* lives."

"I don't know what you're talking about," the agent puffed.

Ross didn't explain. But as he came to the last winding flight of stairs such a heaviness of spirit descended upon him that he found himself walking with a slow restrained pace. It might have been Graygortch tottering weakly—but it was Ross Bradford weighted down with a weird fear unlike anything he—or any other man—had ever known.

Half a flight back of him the British agent was saying, "Zimmerman -believes the old man will never die. If it wasn't for that, the government might take over the place for an observation post. You could spot subs for miles from this tower. And I've been thinking about that machine you claimed you saw . . . If it's just a machine—and if this fellow Jimpson you spoke of could put it to work as a war weapon—'M anyway there's government talk of jailing the old man and confiscating—"

"S-s-sh." Ross waved back at the agent, then he felt the blood freeze in his finger tips. His hands went stiff on the flashlantern as he shot it across the open tower top.

"Vivian!" he breathed, and the circular walls echoed his whisper. His flashlantern was turned toward the core of the huge disc-shaped instrument.

"Ross—thank God you've come!" The girl's low spoken words were a strange mingling of tragedy and gladness. "Here, Ross, come and sit with us."

SHE was kneeling in the center of the room at the semi-circular bench where the stiff old figure of Graygortch lay. The old man's eyes were half closed. Somehow Ross knew at once that at last Death was taking the old fellow away.

"Vivian, did he—did he keep his threat?"

Ross wished he hadn't asked, for the girl quickly put her fingers to her lips.

It was Graygortch who spoke, in the slow gentle rumbling voice, no harsher for the state of death that was swiftly engulfing him.

"Is this the young man, Vivian?"

"Yes, Uncle Bill."

"Come . . ."

Ross advanced under the low ceiling of the death machine, knelt beside Vivian, slipped an arm around her. With the other hand he pressed the gaunt fingers of the mysterious old master of death.

"Yes, you are the one," Graygortch said softly. "This evil thing that lived in me forced me to marry Vivian to you . . . But I'm thinking that's one act I'm willing to approve—if you feel the way Vivian does."

"Yes, your honor," Ross said eagerly. "Vivian and I are meant for each other. Now that we have your sanction, your honor, we're man and wife."

"Good," the old man breathed. "But I'm not *your honor,* I'm just Bill Graygortch. It's gone, now. It's left me for good. I wish I could see Doc—Doc Zimmerman."

"I think he's on his way up," said Ross.

"I'll wait," said Graygortch.

Ross rose, and Vivian stood beside him, her eyes moist, her lips faintly smiling.

"Hank and Sue are here," she whispered. "They'll tell you what happened. It's too terrifying—and I thought you were being killed somewhere out there—"

"Don't think about it." Ross kissed her cheeks, her eyes, her lips. "Don't think at all."

TURNING the flashlantern, he found that Sue and Hank had joined the British agent near the head of the stairs. He went over to them, heard the brief but graphic description of Jimpson's supreme sacrifice. Sue was talking.

"Jimpson must have guessed the workings of that machine somehow," she said, "because he was deadly determined to make it up here to the tower before the old man could pass the evil power on to Vivian. He believed it could be done. It sounded screwy to me, but I had seen that power reach clear to Japan. So I said okay, we'd make it up with ropes and hooks or break our fool necks."

Ross flashed the light up to the lofty rim of stone and saw the loops of rope that had helped them up from the outside. Sue continued, under the admiring but baffled stare of Hank:

"As quick as we got up here and Jimpson saw the instrument go to work his brain was on fire. What that little crippled fellow knew would have uncorked a new world of science. He said he didn't know how Graygortch could ever have known about this machine; in fact, he couldn't convince himself that Graygortch did know about it."

"But the machine?" Ross asked.

"That," said Vivian, "he believed was a device to create new atoms, whose electrons would spin in reverse order. He whispered to me, just a few seconds before he jumped, that if each of those thirteen guns was spraying *matter* that was organized *in reverse*, it would account for the disintegration of air or anything else within range of the guns."

"If the British only had a weapon like that!" the curt young agent muttered.

"Then we saw twelve of the thirteen disciples coming in as if by radio, and their faces just hovered there," Sue said, "and they seemed to be sharing their secret powers—and the tower was rocking and I was hanging on for dear life—"

"And Vivian," said Hank, "was calling for you, Ross."

"And that's when it happened," said Sue, rolling her eyes toward the top of the wall. "That nervy little cripple whispered to me, 'I've beat death once, and here's my chance to blow that machine *before it gets her.*' And I said, 'Where are you going?' And Jimpson answered, 'Maybe to another world—yes, I think this'll do it!' And then he jumped, landed across those electrical keys, and went out in a flash of fire."

"*Went out?*" Ross repeated.

"Out," said Hank, "like a light."

THE party moved back to the center of the huge instrument and turned the flashlantern on what had been the table of controls. There was nothing on the table but a scorched surface—The mysteries that had resided in those controls, like the mysteries that had lighted Jimpson's brain, had *departed* in one quick flash of fire.

"Here's Dr. Zimmerman now," said Vivian, touching the old man lightly on the forehead. "Fantella, too."

Ross turned the light, but the couple had brought another lantern to guide them up the long ascent. They looked exhausted from their climb, but the Doctor paled still more as he knelt down beside his old checker-playing partner.

"It's good to see you," Graygortch whispered, hardly moving his glassy eyes. "Both of you . . . I wanted you to know—it's *gone*—for good."

"Bill!" the silver-haired doctor breathed. "You're sure it won't come back."

"I'm sure . . . I could see it go . . . like a ghost floating off into the sky . . .

Oh, Doc . . . you don't know how glad I am . . . to be able to die . . . like this."

Within a few minutes life had departed from the old man.

No one grieved as sorrowful people grieve when death is tragic. For this death had been merciful, almost as if it were the willful act of a free man, freed after nine years of imprisonment from some other-worldly power.

"It must have been other-worldly," Ross said. "The knowledge back of this machine—"

The doctor broke in, speaking with a strained effort to control his voice. "I've a confession. I didn't think he would die. I didn't think he could . . . Nine years ago I left a little orange bottle of medicine in his study. It was an experimental medicine for prolonging life—"

"Wait a minute," said Sue Smith. "That couldn't make him a genius inventor right out of the blue—"

"I'm convinced," the doctor continued, "that I not only prolonged his life, but that I am guilty of bringing on his awful insanity—"

"Dot's bumkumb," Fantella interrupted. "I'fe got der convession too. Dot leedle orange bottle I threw out der vindow der minute you vas gone, my good doctor. Old Bill nefer touched it."

From the look of relief that came to the doctor's face, Ross knew that the burden of that man's life had been lifted.

"Uncle Bill's word is good enough for me," said Vivian softly. "If it was something from another world, we can't hope to understand it—"

"Until Jimpson comes back to us," said Hank.

Ross took a deep breath. "Maybe someday we'll know. But now—well, Vivian—er—Mrs. Bradford—"

"Thank you," Vivian whispered, snuggling into his arms.

"Mrs. Bradford, would you like to unpack? England's got a job on her hands. She needs this castle—and us—and the maids and the sailors—who, by the way, have the makings of a crack military force—"

"Pardon us," said Sue Smith, catching Hank by the arm and leading him toward the stairs. "I've got to talk things over with my boy friend. Maybe we'll stay and help you."

"Dot's nice," Fantella smiled after them, then wrinkled her face in a comical scowl. "But if effer anybody leafs me sitting vor two hours in der rowboat again, in der middle uff an earthquaker, dare'll be another var—mit broomsticks."

FACTORIES OF THE FUTURE—NOW!

What the war is doing to bring science fiction stories of future industry to present reality.

AT ONE time not so long ago many Americans looked upon bomb proof shelters, blackouts, air raids, and underground factories as just mere reading matter. There was something unreal about all these things—something fictional. But fortunately for us our factory engineers weren't taking

any chances on having our essential industries made easy prey for snarling enemy bombers.

For instance, one aircraft company already has underway an underground factory; and the 23-acre North American Aviation Corporation plant at Dallas, Texas is built to withstand even direct bomb hits with a minimum of damage. Fireproof structural steel deckings placed one upon the other in layer-cake fashion help make bomb penetration difficult. Furthermore, concrete bomb baffles reinforce the outer walls of this factory to a height of nearly six feet.

Up until the start of the Japanese War there were two predominant types of factories; mainly the daylight plant and the blackout plant. Both of these plants were being built on a single floor, because industrial engineers have found that it costs less to move men and materials over a large flat area than it does to move them up and down over a smaller area involving several stories. More recent construction has shown a trend toward the blackout type of factory. With the danger of night bombings this fact would seem obvious, but the blackout plant is even superior in protection during the daytime. Daylight factories, you see, have large areas of skylights, and skylights reflect light unless painted with opaque paint. You can get an idea of how penetrating this reflected light is if you just remember how bright the reflected sunlight from an automobile windshield is when it smacks you in the eye.

There is a good chance that, war or no war, the blackout type of plant is here to stay. Such a plant has no windows and must be air-conditioned and efficiently lighted. Plant experts have long ago discovered that worker efficiency and output soar upward with comfort. Imagine trying to complete an accurate drawing with sweaty fingers. Then, too, precision parts are constantly changing in size with changes in temperature; so a constant temperature is the only answer to this problem.

The Austin Co., plant construction engineers, estimate that although it costs ten to twenty-five per cent more to build a blackout plant, the increase in production would make up for it in about fifteen years.

The automobile has done much to influence the location of modern factories. In former years most of our manufacturing was done in small congested areas. Now, we have turned to the wide open spaces and our large manufacturing plants are beginning to take the shape of little autonomous cities, complete down to a police force. The Douglas factory, for example, has a telephone system with 70 trunk lines and 27 switchboard operators; equivalent to a city of 60,000. Public address systems for announcements, paging, news reports and music are now considered essentials.

While the automobile has moved our plants from congested areas to outlying districts, it has also complicated the problem of camouflage. From the air an automobile, particularly a new, shiny one, is a good target to spot. Hence, industrial engineers are turning their eyes toward the problem of camouflage. Large parking lots are being roofed in and the shelters painted with landscape green paint. Roofs are being made to looke like wheat fields, paved highways like muddy wagon roads. Will the future bring huge underground caverns, humming with industrial activity as bombs burst harmlessly up above? Will the office building and residence of the future point down into the guts of the earth, or will it continue to grasp greedily at the clouds?—*Gerold Flagstone.*

Devil

Birds of Deimos

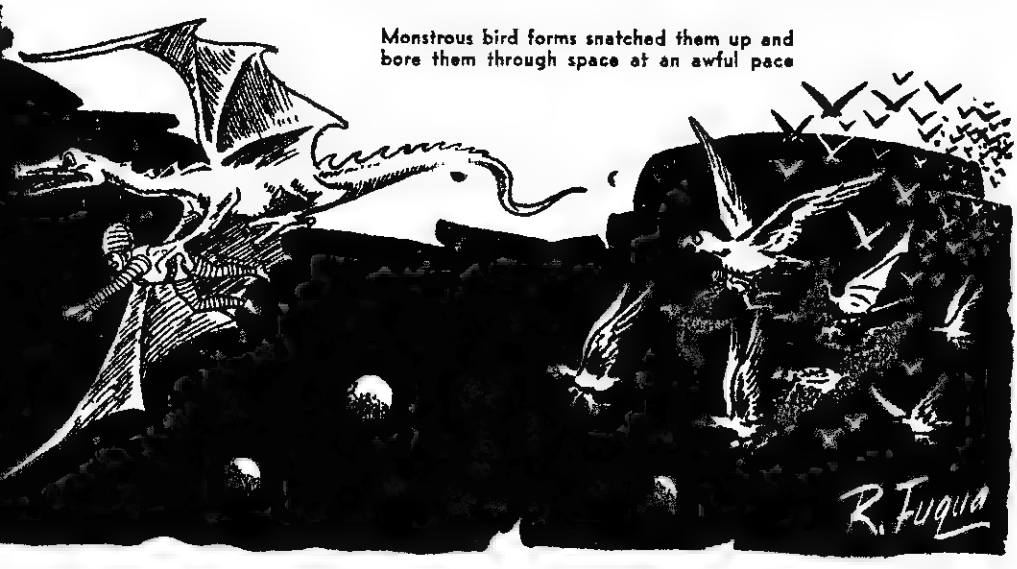
By FESTUS PRAGNELL

Don Hargreaves finds that fighting huge birds of space who fly as fast as light is simple if you know how . . . !

IN the end I got back to Usulor's court, bringing Bommelsmeth's Evolution Machine and Bommelsmeth himself, turned into an imitation sea-lion, with me. I don't mean that Bommelsmeth really was turned into a sea-lion. I mean he was more like a sea-lion than any other animal I ever saw. He followed me like a dog. He had to. He still had the mind of a man. He could not live like a sea-lion among sea-lions. He didn't know how to. He was reduced to a condition of complete helplessness.

And so I arrived back in Usulor's court, Vans Holors, wrestling champion of Mars and a really good fellow, even though he is rather dumb, carrying the Evolution Machine. Before I could tell my story we had an accident with the machine. In spite of warnings Vans' wife blundered into the ray and got turned into a sort of flamingo. In view of the way that female had been behaving it seemed to me that trusting, honest Vans had not lost much, but he was very upset about it. She flew off, and he went after her in an airplane.

Then, as I said, the whole of Mars was very soon in a ferment of excitement. Not because Bommelsmeth was captured and helpless. But because here was a machine that could turn a living human being into a weird animal. Come to think of it, I suppose, a machine like that would cause a lot



Monstrous bird forms snatched them up and bore them through space at an awful pace

of fuss at home on Earth. Here, plain for everybody to see, was a sea-lion unlike any sea-lion ever seen before, and which understood what was said to it. And the wrestling champion of Mars presently came flying back with a captive bird something like a flamingo which he said, sobbing, was his unfaithful, self-willed but very repentent wife.

It affected my reputation, too. The ordinary people of Mars had called me, first, "The Earthing" and then "Usulor's pup" or "Wimp's pet" and when the Princess announced her intention of marrying me they referred to me, partly in envy, as "King Don." Now I was always called "Hargreaves," and the machine was called "The Hargreaves Machine." As though I had invented it. There was more fuss over that toy than there was over the Sommalu or Bommelsmeth wars or my rescue of the Princess from kidnaping or Vans saving her from assassination.*

And blow me down if old man Usulor himself did not take up Bommelsmeth's experiments where Bommelsmeth had left off. Criminals from Martian jails were subjected to the ray. I did not like it, but I could do nothing. To object to anything that excitable but on the whole well-meaning old Usulor had set his mind on was dangerous even for me, who could always count on the protection of Wimpolo, who, gigantic and unbeautiful Martian woman though she was, was still a most affectionate and lovable girl. I know you think it odd that I should love a Martian who weighs half a ton and can carry me about in one hand, but if you knew Wimpolo you would understand.

And now, to roars of kingly laughter, Martian criminals were turned into freaks with the heads of donkeys and the bodies of crocodiles, the heads of bears, legs of tigers and bodies of birds, mixed crabs, fish, dogs, horses, octopi, anything. I found it sickening. But when Princess Wimpolo the only person on Mars who dared to risk anger-

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The Imperial Palace,
Mars.

Dear Festus:

* I've certainly set things moving here in Mars. There has not been so much excitement in the planet since the draining of the seas and air into its enormous caverns forced the giant human race that occupies that world to follow the air and water and live underground. Here, away from the light of the sun and out of reach of the progress-stimulating cosmic rays, Mars has stagnated. Evolution came to a halt. Scientific progress, which had been enormous, went no further.

The arrival of men from Earth on the surface of Mars in search of rare metals ended this stagnation. A few men and women fom the mines blundered accidentally into the deep, inhabited caverns. They were well received and called "Earthlings" because they were so small compared to the gigantic Martians. Martian ladies adopted Earthlings as pets, just as Princess Wimpolo, daughter of the fierce Usulor, King, Emperor and Overlord of the entire planet, adopted me, Don Hargreaves.

As a little yeast sets a great mass of dough bubbling, so the presence of we few Earthlings set all Mars in a ferment. Jealousies were aroused, especially when Wimpolo let the rumor spread that she intended to marry me and make me Emperor and Overlord of Mars one day in succession to Usulor.

Lesser Kings of Mars, many of whom had eligible sons or personal ambitions, fumed. Two of them, Sommalu and Bommelsmeth, and perhaps others, overhauled their rusting war weapons and set their scientists inventing new ones. Sommalu had a particularly horrible weapon, a species of Fighting Flies. But they proved to be uncontrollable in war and liable to turn on their users. Otherwise Sommalu might have usurped Usulor's throne.

Bommelsmeth was far cleverer and more dangerous than Sommalu had been. His resources seemed unlimited, the surprises he sprang endless. But in the end he was overcome. Mars settled down to recover after devastation many times worse than that you tell me air-raids have made in the cities of Britain.

But Bommelsmeth was not done with. With spies and fifth columnists he set out to murder and kidnap influential people in Usulor's court. And he kidnaped me. But he caught a Tartar. These Martians are immensely strong and clever, but slow. They never seem to understand how very much quicker than theirs are the muscles and brains of we tiny Earthlings. I gave them the slip, and in the mix-up of the chase after me I

ing her father, said so, he became serious. He was studying the ray, he said. He was trying to find out why it produced such different results in different cases. Already his scientists had analyzed the ray into several different components, some violent and uncontrollable some more beneficial. Presently he would be able to end the evolutionary stagnation of Mars. He would "improve the stock." As though his subjects were cattle. Martians would not be forever "confined to the interior of a small and shrinking planet."

IN the middle of all this excitement I was married to Princess Wimpolo, and you can imagine all the processions, ceremonies, television broadcasts and general hullabaloo that went with the marriage of the first lady in all Mars to a visitor from another world. You can imagine the discontented mutterings, too, but neither Usulor nor his daughter were likely to take much notice of that. Martian scientists backed us up. They said that the Martian race was a "tired" race, biologically speaking, and needed the virility that interbreeding with another race would bring. Marrying Earthlings became quite fashionable among high Martian circles, and I fear will be followed later by a spate of divorces.

"And what about our honeymoon?" Wimpolo demanded.

"Certainly," said old Usulor, beaming. "I have arranged a triumphal tour of Mars, sight-seeing, hunting of wild snakes. . . ."

"Huh!" snorted Wimpolo, disgustedly. "What's the use of that? I've seen it all before, dozens of times."

I've never seen a smile vanish off a man's face quicker than old Usulor's did then.

"Well, what else would you suggest?"

"I want a space-voyage."

Honest, Festus, I've seen old Usulor explode with rage many times, but the performance he put up then beat any-

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managed to upset Bommelsmeth's own Evolution Machine. And that Evolution Machine, Festus, beat any machine you ever set eyes on in your dull life. Why *don't* you come and live with me in Mars and have some fun? Stagnating back there on Earth! That's no life for a man.

With Bommelsmeth trying his best to chop my head off with his heavy sword, that Evolution Hastening Machine got busy on him and his men. In a few minutes they sprouted fur, feathers, wings, scales and claws, Bommelsmeth becoming a sort of sea-lion.

As I think I explained in my last letter, Bommelsmeth's scientists had succeeded in isolating and reproducing those constituents of the cosmic rays that control evolution. Lack of these rays caused the evolution of the Martians in their underground cities to come to a halt. Bommelsmeth could either speed up or reverse evolution at will. His evolution reversing ray turned men into sub-human apes. The evolution-hastening ray was much more uncertain and unpredictable in its actions.

There was absolutely no limit to the changes that might occur in a human being who was subjected to the influence of the evolution-speeding ray. A nose might develop into the trunk of an elephant, feet into fish's tails, tails might sprout from the body anywhere. In fact, anything might happen. Amusing himself by turning the ray on his prisoners, Bommelsmeth could produce nothing but extraordinary freaks. No super-capable creatures likely to be of use to him in his efforts to depose Usulor and murder his daughter appeared.

Bommelsmeth's scientists explained that to their disappointed boss like this: All evolution in Mars had come to a halt thousands of years ago. Trying to start it up again was like starting up an automobile that had not been used for hundreds of years. It would be choked with dust and rust. parts would have perished. It might backfire, move in the wrong direction, blow up, catch fire, anything. To produce the highly evolved creatures he wanted Bommelsmeth should try his ray on an Earthling.

He did, on me. At first the only effect of the ray was to make me smaller. I was never very big, as you know, Festus, but I am still smaller now. But that experiment was never completed The subject escaped. My reduced hands slipped out of the rings that held them, I jumped over the heads of Bommelsmeth and his men and led them a merry dance. But it takes a lot of doing for a Martian to catch an Earthling. They are so slow I dodged them, doubled back and created a deuce of an uproar.

Lively times, Festus.

—*Don Hargreaves.*

thing I'd ever seen before. Usulor's rages are majestic sights, quite interesting if you don't happen to be the object of them. He stamps, he thrashes the air with his arms, he gnashes his teeth, he emits uncouth bellowing noises and he roars order after order at his servants, only usually to countermand them afterwards. And little seven-stone me has to jump around pretty lively to avoid being injured by the flying bits of the crockery that he hurls on the floor with all the strength of his seventeen hundredweight.

Wimpolo just put on that obstinate expression of hers and waited for him to get out of breath.

Presently he began to realize that all this expenditure of energy and crockery wasn't getting him anywhere. He stopped dancing suddenly.

"Will you never get over this mad-cap craziness of yours?" he hissed. "Will you never realize what is fitting for the first lady in Mars? Will you always rush into all the trouble you can find? When I was at war with Sommalu you actually went spying in his country unattended."

He can never forget that particular piece of rashness.

"My little Don looks after me remarkably well," she countered, tossing her head.

"That's not the point. One day you'll get killed, and what will your poor old dad do then?"

This sudden change of attitude shook her, but I'm afraid he has spoiled her too thoroughly to get the better of her that way.

"Why should I be shut up in the caverns of Mars all my life?"

"But *I've* been shut up in them all my life. So has everybody else in Mars."

"But there's no need to stay shut up in them any longer. We've got over the krypton difficulty, haven't we? And there are plenty of space-ships."

That startled me.

"Where?" snapped Usulor.

"In the museums."

"Those things!" screamed Usulor. "You'd risk your life in one of those? Why, they haven't been used for umpteen thousand years!"

"All they want is cleaning up and re-stocking."

He looked at me with a sort of despairing groan.

"You don't know what you've taken on, Don my boy," he said. "If you can tame this daughter of mine, you'll do something I never could. Look here, Wimp. Let me show you over some of these space-ships. I guarantee I'll soon show you that they are the most uncomfortable, dangerous things to travel in that ever were. No place for a gently-bred lady."

She snorted in a most unladylike manner.

"Gently-bred lady! Why, when I was carried off by the man-apes of Bommelsmeth. . . ."

She referred to a particularly horrible experience of hers. She could have been excused had she died of fright after it. Yet it didn't seem to have done her the slightest harm. They breed them tough in the caverns of Mars, where tons of rock may fall on your head at any moment, or a man-eating snake slither out of a small cavern, or the ground give way under your feet as a new cave-in enlarges a cavern beneath you.

CHAPTER II

Launched!

NEEDLESS to say, Wimpolo had talked her father round to a grudging assent to her point of view in an

hour or so. She was pretending to be very much on her dignity now, annoyed with him for his names, "Madcap," "Wild girl," "Uncontrollable" and the rest of it.

"Well, perhaps I didn't *really* mean it," he muttered uncomfortably, as he stumped off in advance of us. Wimpolo followed in offended silence. But she gave me a playful pinch in the side behind her dad's back, and I knew that she was very pleased with herself. Incidentally, she nearly broke three of my ribs.

"If only you'd be *reasonable,*" Usulor rumbled on. "Then I wouldn't need to say such things."

We passed the bathing-pool. The sea-lion broke surface, swimming vigorously, and clambered awkwardly over the rocks to us, leaving a trail of water and weed. The palace sea-lion is, of course, Bommelsmeth, once Usulor's bitterest enemy and now reduced to complete helplessness and dependence by his own Evolution Machine. He follows me like a dog.

"Wuff! Wuff! Wuff!" he barked, excitedly. He knew we were off on some journey and wanted to come too.

"We don't want him," snapped Usulor. "Here, you there! Give this animal a whipping and throw it back in the water."

The sea-lion, who, of course, understood what he said, looked very upset. Palace attendants ran up to carry out the King's orders.

Wimpolo tossed her head.

"If I can't have my pets," she snorted.

"Oh, all right, all right!" Usulor broke out. "Let the creature alone. Let it come with us. Let her have two zoos and three aquariums if she wants to."

His resistance was worn down. The palace servants, quite accustomed to this sort of thing, were not in the least surprised. Maybe I am a bit rash myself in keeping Bommelsmeth around me, even in his changed form. After all, he had not been exactly a nice character. Still, what I feel is that when I've got him under my eyes then I know that he is not up to any mischief. And, as Usulor says, if he were dead one of his sons would step into his shoes as leader of all the discontented elements in Mars. Alive, he is a sort of hostage.

Then a gigantic Martian came running up. It was Vans Holors, wrestling champion of the planet and one of the best of Martians.

"Where are you going?"

I told him.

"Let me get Olla," he said. "We'll come."

"I suppose we'll have to take them too?" Usulor asked of his daughter, resignedly.

"If I can't take my friends, and Don's friends!"

"Hrrrmph!"

SO Vans came, bringing the flamingo-like bird who was his erring and unfortunate wife. As the royal traffic-sphere stopped for us to get in Vans humped in a huge box.

"What have you got there, Vans?" I asked him, suspecting what it was.

"It is the original Evolution Machine," he whispered.

"What do we want with that?"

"Well, you see, Don, I thought that, seeing Bommelsmeth is with us, if we could get him to tell us how the thing works we might be able to change Olla back into her natural form again. I want my wife back. You've no idea how it hurts me to see her like this."

"Vans," I said, sadly, "you know very well that all the best scientists in Mars have been working on that ray for months. They cannot find out how

to control it. It is most erratic and unpredictable in its results. Do you think Bommelsmeth would stay a sea-lion if it were possible for him to become human again?"

"Yes, but it's his machine. He knows how it works," Vans persisted.

Olla has a much better husband than she deserves.

In the royal museum grounds we found the space-ship already cleaned up, oiled up, filled up, stocked up. All ready to start. It was Wimpolo's surprise for us. Usulor grunted as though his worst suspicions were confirmed. Wimpolo, forgetting her sulks, ran all over the ship, explaining this point and that. It really was an elegant job. She was as happy about it as a schoolgirl on vacation.

We all met in the main room.

"Wimpolo," Usulor was saying, "I give consent to your spending your honeymoon aboard this ship provided you go no further than—"

Just then a sudden roar and shock threw us all to the floor.

The rocket-tubes were in action, shaking the ship with their thunderous roar.

Usulor sat up, glaring at his daughter.

"You go too far with your jokes."

"It isn't me, dad," Wimpolo assured him. "I gave no orders for this, I don't know what's happening."

The sea-lion, barking excitedly, slithered and flapped his awkward way out of the door.

"Your engineers testing the machinery," I suggested.

"Hrrrmph! More likely the fools forgot the safety catches, and the ship has started accidentally," Usulor growled.

WE WERE all sitting on the floor, where the shock had thrown us.

"Where's my Olla?" demanded Vans, looking round anxiously for the flamingo.

"Hrrrmph! Don't bother about your useless bird now. Go to the control room. Find out what's wrong. Stop the ship. Yes, by thunder! Stop her before she crashes into the cavern roof."

"But that shock," Vans persisted, "Might easily have broken my Olla's legs. Or even her long, slender neck. I must find her."

He struggled to his feet.

"Hrrrmph!" bellowed Usulor, excitedly. "That flamingo! Where did it get to? That bird is at the bottom of this. Find it!"

He got up to follow Vans.

"Don!" Wimpolo whispered to me. "Something is seriously wrong. Go and see."

I could run the length of the ship in half the time it took the ponderous Martians. The acceleration-thrust was little handicap to me, since it was not a lot more than normal Earth gravity. To the Martians, of course, it was a heavy strain.

I ran along a corridor to the rocket-control room. Our brief inspection of the ship told me where it was.

The massive metal door was locked. I saw at once that the only way through was to cut a way through with a dissolving ray. Beyond the door the rockets were thundering. Somebody had started up those rockets and locked the door to prevent their being turned off again.

In a world like Mars, it didn't take me a moment to realize what that meant. Assassination! Somebody was having another try to murder Princess Wimpolo, old King Usulor and me too. An inside job, just like the other attempt to murder Wimpolo had been. Some palace servant, possibly, seeing us go into the space-ship, had followed,

locked the door to the rocket-rooms and started up the rockets. He would know, of course, that the unguided ship would very soon crash to destruction. Amazing luck that it had not done so already. The assassin, of course, must be some crazy fanatic, quite prepared to die with us if only he accomplish his end in destroying the King of Mars, his daughter, and his daughter's husband.

Then a sudden thought struck me.

Was Olla the culprit? Of course, she knew where we were. She could slip away from the rest of us, lock the door and start up the rockets. And she would not need to die with us. She would just jump out of a door or window and fly down on her long, graceful wings. From what I knew of her character as a woman it seemed quite a possible thing for her to do.

I ran to a window and looked down. Far below the fast-driving ship was a fluttering patch of white. I felt sick of human nature then. After all Van's love and care, undeserved though it had been, she tries to murder him and all the royal family with him, I thought.

FASTER and faster went the ship. It was shooting up at an angle of about forty-five degrees now. Ahead was an immense wall of rock. A few more seconds and all would be over . . . Miraculously, the ship swerved to one side, gliding past the obstacle. It was a near thing. Ahead was another wall of rock. It was too much to hope that another such miracle would happen again. The end was certain to come in a minute or so. Nothing could prevent it. Well, none of us would know anything about it when it did happen. The impact would be annihilating.

Usulor was roaring through the ship.

"Don! Hargreaves! E a r t h l i n g ! Where are you?"

"It was useless for me to try to shout back. I haven't got foghorn Martian lungs whose bellow can be heard almost a mile away. I ran out into the main center funnel of the ship with its zigzag staircase and let him see me.

"Oh, there you are!" he roared. "Why don't you cut down the power of the rockets? We'll all be killed."

I raced up to him and told him the door was locked.

"You mean to tell me that you can't get at the rocket compartments?"

"No."

"And you haven't been guiding the ship?"

"No."

"Then who has?"

"Nobody I'm afraid," I said. "This ship is running blind. Nobody is at the wheel."

"Nonsense!" he bellowed. "If that was true we'd all have been killed long ago. Somebody is piloting this ship. Piloting it pretty recklessly, too. Twenty times we have avoided disaster by less than the length of my body. There we go again."

The ship was now going at a speed I estimated to be rather over four hundred miles an hour. Usulor exaggerated a little but it certainly was unnerving to see mightly masses of rock rush at us at terrifying speed to jerk aside at the very last moment.

A star would gleam in the darkness. We would know it for a hanging lamp, a sort of Martian air lighthouse, hung there to warn their swift aircraft of a down-jutting pinnacle of rock. The light would expand at terrifying speed, and then our searchlights would show us a massive inverted mountain rushing at us. Or the wall of the vast cavern itself, or one of the mighty supports of its colossal roof.

"This speed among all these dangers," Usulor rumbled. "It is suicide! Who is piloting this ship?"

I was sufficiently relieved to know that it was being piloted at all, although it was clear that the pilot, whoever he was, was having a hectic struggle to keep us off the rocks. And speed was increasing, too. Before long it would be beyond the power of any human eyes to see oncoming danger soon enough for human hands to make any move to avoid it.

"The door to the control-room is locked," I said. "You'll have to dissolve the lock to get in."

"Don't be silly," said Wimpolo, sharply. "The pilot-room is this way."

She pointed to the nose of the ship.

"But the rockets are that way," I objected, pointing to the stern.

"The main driving rockets, yes. But the smaller, guiding rockets are in the nose. They turn the nose of the ship any way you want, correct any spin, wobble or other unnecessary movement of the ship. Didn't I show you that during our inspection?"

NOW I was reminded, I believe she did. But in the excitement I had forgotten. We had all forgotten.

So, we all trooped to the little control-room. And, would you credit it? The sea-lion and the flamingo were seated at the controls, punching this lever, turning that wheel, guiding the ship. Making a good job of it, too.

Just as we got there they both left the controls, twittering and barking with relief, and rolled over the floor together, playing with each other. Looking out of a window, I saw that the spaceship was clear out of Mars, out in free space. She had come out of the great exit cavern of the planet. Danger was over for the time being.

"What is the meaning of all this?" Usulor demanded.

The sea-lion got out the list of letters he used to communicate with me and pointed to letters, spelling out Martian words. He said that the two animals, finding themselves unable to stop the ship, had gone at once to the control-room to guide it on the only safe course.

"But I thought I saw you flying away," I said to Olla.

"It was probably the parachute of the real criminal that you saw," Bommelsmeth answered.

The two animals had been quicker in thought and action than any of us human beings. That fact had saved all our lives. It seemed odd.

Usulor leaped for the radio-television. In a moment or so, on the amazingly efficient Martian network, which never seems to fail, he was talking to his police chiefs, army chiefs and astronomers. We could all follow.

Police officials were most apologetic. No notice had been given them of the visit of the royal party to the museum, there had been no reason to anticipate danger.

"Can that," barked Usulor. "Have you any news of anybody jumping out of this ship?"

"Jumping out?" The Police Chief looked shocked. "I'll have a search for the body. If anything is left of it. I hope it wasn't the Princess, or Prince Don, or Vans."

"Fool!" Usulor roared. "Can't you see them in the screen, alive and well? And it wasn't suicide. He went down by parachute."

"Parachute? Oh, yes, I see."

"Listen to this, and get this idea well into your thick head. You've got to find me that parachute-jumper, alive or dead. Because he is the criminal who tried to murder us all."

"Certainly, Your Majesty. But it'll be difficult. He may have come down in an unlighted spot."

It is always night in the underground world of Mars. There is no daylight.

A world of darkness lit by lamps and searchlights. That is one reason why man-eating snakes and criminals are such problems there. As the Police Chief said, if the parachute-jumper landed in a dark place he would probably get away.

The idea that the criminal might get away infuriated Usulor.

"Did nobody see him jump? What were the air-observers doing with their telescopes? Operator! Give me the Observers!"

In a moment he was talking to the Observer Chief.

"Yes, Your Majesty! Directly news was received of the premature launching of the ship, our telescopes began at once to search for it. The fact that existence of this ship had been kept so secret made things difficult. No precautions had been devised. The great speed attained—"

"No doubt, no doubt. Did you see anybody jump out?"

"Yes we did. We are developing the photographic plates now. We are waiting confirmation of some rather unusual details."

An assistant brought the Chief Observer some plates. He bent over them.

"Your Majesty, your ship was shot out of Mars into space by a creature with the body of a horse and the wings of an eagle."

CHAPTER III

Space Birds

AS HE spoke, the Chief Observer held up to the screen a picture. Silhouetted against a searchlight glare, we saw this creature. Mild gravity has produced on Mars an extraordinary variety of giant birds. It is so easy, you see, to fly. But this being shown launching itself upon the air after its attempt to murder us was an impossibly weird being even for Mars. No words, nothing but a picture, could possibly convey any idea of how strange it was. The Observer's words, "the body of a horse and the wings of an eagle" was a very rough description. Even when one remembers that he was speaking of Martian horses and Martian eagles.

Wimpolo broke our amazed silence with an abrupt laugh.

"Well dad, you *would* fill Mars with these Evolution Machine products. And most of them were criminals from the jails before you changed them."

Her father looked at her.

"You think that thing is one of my freaks?"

"Sure of it."

"And those things retain enough intelligence to be dangerous?"

"Of course they do. We tried to warn you. You had examples in front of you."

She pointed to the sea-lion and the flamingo, who were now bending over diagrams and space-navigation charts.

"Yes, they seem intelligent enough," Usulor muttered.

"Intelligent enough! Why, they are more intelligent than humans! What humans could have saved us all when the ship started on its own, the way they did? No human beings in Mars could have done it. And you have liberated thousands of creatures like them, with superhuman intelligence and unknown possibilities for good or evil. Now who's the madcap? Now who's wild? Now who's uncontrollable?"

"You can't talk to me like that! I'll have you know that I am Emperor and Overlord of Mars, and have to be treated with proper respect, even by my daughter," Usulor shouted, purple at the gills.

But what Princess Wimpolo had said startled me. I had not thought of it like that. The Evolution Machine pro-

duced such amazing physical results that I had not thought of the effects it might be having on the brains of the subjects. No doubt these effects might be equally remarkable. And it was an Evolution-*Advancing*-Machine. Queer how many of us had overlooked that.

I looked at the flamingo. The bird was studying diagrams and charts intently. The feather-brained and irresponsible Olla, wife of Vans Holors, would never have had the brains or the patience to understand them. They were too technical and difficult for me too, for that matter. But now neither the flamingo nor the sea-lion seemed to have the least difficulty with them.

I looked out of a window. We were in space all right. One glance at the dazzling blue sun set in an intensely black sky that was studded with innumerable fiercely glittering stars told me that. Only in absolutely airless space could sun and stars look that way. Mars was now thousands of miles away behind but still filling the sky in one direction.

Gosh, it was good to see the sun and the stars again, even though they looked so unfamiliar. The windows of the space-ship, by the way, were all of a special glass designed to protect sensitive Martian eyes from the dangerous short rays of sunlight. Mars has been without natural ultra-violet for a long while.

As the distance to Mars increased the television slowly faded out, but we could still talk.

VANS found a dissolving ray and went down the zig-zag stairs carrying it. Presently the curious smell of metals turned into dust and gas told us that he was cutting open the locked door.

"Think you can operate this ship?" I asked the sea-lion, anxiously.

He nodded shortly, not turning from his diagrams.

"I am glad of that," I said. "I'm sure neither the King, Wimpolo, Vans nor I could pilot it back to safety. Unless you can we are sunk."

A flipper turned pages. On a diagram he pointed to a disc representing Deimos, one of the tiny moons of Mars. Underneath he indicated a Martian word meaning "damage," or "sabotage." Leaving me to make what I could of this cryptic message, "Deimos-damage," he slipped and slithered out of the room in the ungainly fashion usual to sea-lions, who seem unable to make up their minds whether the back ends of their bodies are really tails or two legs joined together. Down the stairs he went.

I came after him. Vans by now had the door looking pretty silly, and one bash with a massive shoulder crashed it open.

The machinery of the rocket compartment looked all right to me. The sea-lion went over it carefully.

"See any damage?" I asked him.

He nodded.

"Is it bad?"

He nodded again.

"Wuff, wuff, wuff!" he barked.

He was trying to talk to me, forgetting that he no longer had a human voice and could only bark unintelligently.

"Wuff, wuff!" he barked, sadly, realizing this, and led the way upstairs once more. Presently he was pointing out words on a printed page.

"Damage delicate machinery precise control impossible safe navigation Martian caverns impossible landing Deimos best plan effect repairs there return later."

"You mean we shall have to land on Deimos?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Hrrrumph!" grunted old Usulor,

startled.

The reason was quite clear. Landing a space-ship is a most delicate operation. To try to land on Mars with unreliable controls would be suicide. A temporary landing on Deimos would be easy and safe and the best way out of our present troubles.

I explained to Wimpolo.

"What a honeymoon!" was all she said.

We set out to "catch" Deimos, one of the two tiny worlds that circle Mars at such terrific speed.

SEVERAL days had gone by. We were now too far away from Mars for our feeble radio to reach that world. Vans, taking a turn at observation with the telescopes, set the alarm bell ringing. We all came to the control room to see what was wrong. Some new danger must be threatening us, or Vans would not call us like this.

"It's impossible, impossible!" he was saying. "Look there! Do you see what I see?"

We all looked. Honest, of all the absurd, ridiculous things I've ever seen I've never seen anything more absolutely incredible than what I saw then. Winging their way towards us through airless space was a flock of extraordinary birds. Fantastic, nightmare creatures they were, no two alike. Birds and bats and flying dragons, feathery wings, leathery wings, transparent beetle-wings and soft, downy, dusty butterfly wings, every winged creature that the Evolution Machine had ever produced seemed to be out there coming to greet us.

"Surely nothing can live where there is no air," I muttered in amazement.

The sea-lion was pointing to letters and words.

"Not so surprising as you think," he indicated.

"But how can they breathe?"

"They don't. Their bodies have natural chemical reservoirs of oxygen."

"But the lack of pressure?"

"Specially tough skins."

"How can they fly when there is no air for their wings to beat upon?"

"At will their wings become impervious in one direction only to the light pressures, cosmic radiations, gravity and electric or magnetic radiations of space. This creates terrific pressure sending their bodies hurtling in any direction at enormous speed."

So now we know the next step in evolution. It is a creature that can fly through space. Feasible enough, in a way, I suppose. But at first it had me, and all of us, bewildered.

"What shall we do?" Vans asked.

"Tell them to keep their distance," Usulor rapped. He might not understand what was happening, but he was always ready for a fight. So was Vans.

Our radio began to blare orders. The amazing birds came on. I doubt whether they had receivers to pick up our message.

"Talk to them with rays," barked Usulor.

Dissolving rays and death rays stabbed out. But, do you know, we did not hit one of them. They wheeled, banked and whirled so fast that we could not turn the aiming mechanism quickly enough to catch them. They seemed able to see our rays and fly round them. The aiming lights were useless out here, too.

The nearer the amazing army came the more impossible it was to hope to hit them. Presently some of them had landed on our hull.

"We're sunk," I muttered to myself, despairingly.

Vans leaped for a space-suit. I saw what he meant to do. He was going out to fight the space-birds outside, on

the hull. Usulor and I did the same.

We heard the odd sizzling noise of a dissolving ray. The space-birds were cutting through our hull.

"Into a suit," I told Wimpolo. "Our air will escape."

The flamingo and the sea-lion were fumbling awkwardly with suits of their own. I helped Wimpolo into hers and followed Vans and Usulor into the air-lock.

We got out onto the hull.

CHAPTER IV

The Fight

SPACE-BIRDS were all round us. I wielded a death-ray, because the apparatus was lighter and the beam broader. The two Martians had dissolving rays, with heavier apparatus producing a beam rather of less diameter than a lead pencil. Whatever solid matter that beam touched behaved like butter touched by a red-hot needle. Atomic cohesion neutralized, it turned into gas and fluid.

We could not hit those space-birds. I could not hold my beam on one of them long enough to do any harm. A fraction of a second only was needed, but they moved too fast for that. The two Martians, with their more deadly weapons but slow, ponderous movements, could not touch a bird at all.

It was like slashing at mosquitoes with a walking-stick. They swooped and whirled and made sudden right-angle turns. One, I was certain, was laughing at me. He would hover for a moment right in front of me, inviting me to shoot at him. A flick of my wrist would turn my ray towards him, but he would be gone, high over my head.

When they came close they moved so fast that my eyes could not follow them at all. A crack pitcher can throw a ball too fast for an ordinary man to see it. And those space-birds went too fast for me. And I, sweating, nearly fainting with the heat, began to get a feeling that I was playing an odd game of space baseball, with deathray for bat and space-birds for balls.

We were on the sunward side of the ship, and was it hot! I could feel the hot metal of the ship burning my feet through my magnetic shoes. The sun beat upon us and the heat was reflected back by the polished metal of the space-ship. Walking was awkward. With only the feeble grip of the magnetic shoes holding on to the hull one careless step would send one's body shooting away from the ship into space. There would be no getting back.

We had been standing in a sort of triangle protecting each other's backs. The space-birds had stopped cutting through the ship's hull on our side. But on the far side of the hull they were busy. We could feel the vibration through our feet.

Vans strode away on his own to attack them.

Woops!

A bird with the head of a goat swooped down and butted him in the back. Gosh! It was almost funny to see the enormous wrestling champion go shooting into space, arms and legs spread wide like the figure "X". But it was not funny when one realized the awful slow fate in store for the simple but courageous fellow, alone in the depths of space.

Usulor and I stood back to back. The vibration had stopped. The space-birds were inside the ship. I wondered if it would not perhaps be best to go back inside ourselves. Even as I thought of it, it was too late. The small guiding rockets of the ship began to blast. The metal floor under our feet

whisked sideways. The ship had been thrown into a sudden spin.

It was like standing in a train when the train starts suddenly. We were thrown off our feet. But one does not fall in space. We remained suspended, looking down at the spinning ship.

The space-birds, with an amazing variety of beaks and jaws wide open, seemed to be laughing at us.

THE spin stopped. Then the nose of the ship began to go away from us while the stern came round. Another type of spin was being started, an end over end spin. In technical terms, the first spin had been around the line of flight. The axis of the second spin was at right angles to the line of flight.

The stern of the ship hit us, crack! Those space-birds were playing baseball with us all right. Using the ship as a club they had batted us far into space.

After the first crushing impact everything seemed oddly peaceful. The ship and the space-birds were rushing away from me at great speed. The Emperor of Mars was shooting off in another direction. I could not see a sign of Vans. What had happened to Wimpolo, my Martian bride, I had no idea.

I was alone in space. No water, no food, no means of renewing my fast-fouling air supply. But there was no need to worry about any of those things. Very soon none of them would matter.

The sun blazed blue before me. You have no idea how hot the sunshine can be until you are in space. There is no shade out there, not even the smallest cloud or the tiniest cooling breeze.

Before long the temperature of my space suit would be so high that life would be impossible inside it.

And all this had happened because I had not persuaded Wimp from her foolish idea of a space honeymoon.

It was all my fault. If only I had backed up my father-in-law.

I must have gone partly unconscious. Stars, sun and Mars looked blurry. I thought I saw a spread of white wings and felt the beak of a flamingo take hold of the middle of my back. I seemed to be being towed through space. Spreading wings between me and the sun seemed to cool me.

Delirium, I thought. But a glorious feeling of peace it brought. I dozed off to sleep.

WHEN the three of us went out of the ship to fight the space-birds, Princess Wimpolo tried to follow. I quickly pushed the door closed. She beat on it with her fists.

"Let me come," she shouted. "I can fight as well as any of you."

"Stay where you are safe," her father ordered.

"Safe?" she snapped. "What do you call safe? I'm no safer in here than I'd be out there."

Then the air whistling out of the air-lock made talking difficult. But we could hear her metal shoes banging against the door.

She backed away from the door, fuming.

"Aren't men fools!" she muttered.

Then she heard the dissolving ray sizzling through the hull of the ship. Grabbing her death-ray, she clattered down the zig-zag stairs as fast as the weightlessness of space would let her. The flamingo and the sea-lion had now given up trying to get into space suits made for men. The bird flapped its wings and flew along the central funnel of the ship, carrying a death-ray in its beak. The sea-lion took a header off the landing and dived the length of the ship.

Wimpolo was in doubt as to which compartment the noise was coming from, but the animals seemed to know.

They waited outside a door. She opened it and felt a rush of air whistling out of the ship.

A weird collection of winged monstrosities was swarming through a hole in the hull. Two death rays and one dissolving ray stabbed into the mass, annihilating it in an instant. Others, half way in, got out again in a hurry.

The sea-lion was coughing in distress. She thought it had been hit, but it was the fall in air-pressure that hurt it. The sea-lion waddled out of the door.

The sizzling noise came now from another direction.

"Hell and damnation!" Wimpolo grunted. "What are those fools doing outside? Why can't they stop this?"

With the flamingo she went to repel this second attack. This time there were no space-birds inside the ship. They had just cut a hole and left it at that. Letting all the air out of the ship seemed to be their idea.

The only thing to do was to close that compartment against further loss of air. Then off to do the same with the next punctured compartment.

She missed the flamingo suddenly. The poor girl must have collapsed from lack of air, Wimpolo decided.

There was a curious green smoke in the air. It didn't look quite like the gas produced by dissolving rays. The inside of her suit smelled funny. Someone must have neglected to see that the suits were kept properly clean.

The inside of the ship looked oddly blurred.

"Hell and damnation!" exclaimed Princess Wimpolo.

SHE had realized that the green smoke was gas. It was a gas that seeped through the rubber joints of her spacesuit. The space-birds were attacking her with a penetrating atomic gas.

She could see the gas whistling through a hole in one of the compartment doors. The space-birds must be in that compartment squirting gas at her. She'd show them.

Lurching awkwardly on drunken feet she played her death-ray on the door. It would work through the door almost as well as with no door there. But the gas still came through. Gas was coming through other doors now.

Nearly overcome with gas, she flung open the door. A great surge of gas came out at her. There were no space-birds here, but a rubbery sheet covered the hole in the hull, and through a hole in the sheet gas came in jets. She tried to aim her death-ray, but her fumbling hands coudn't find the buttons. The box slipped out of her hands and floated away.

She didn't fall, because she was weightless. She just passed out on her feet. Space-birds swarmed into the ship. They seemed to be laughing at her. Unable to resist, she felt her arms tied. Then the ship spun under her, making her fall and roll. It stopped, and spun the other way, end over end. That sent her with a heavy bump to the far end of the compartment. Luckily her suit was of tough Martian make, very resistant to violence. An Earth faceplate of glass would have shattered.

Vaguely she was aware that space-birds were carrying her, or, rather, towing her through the air.

She wished she knew what they were laughing at.

CHAPTER V

Dangers of Deimos

OLLA the flamingo had not fainted for lack of air. Nor had she been gassed. She had merely gone out through one of the holes on reconnaissance, to have a look round.

Lack of air gave her no trouble. She too was a space-bird, she discovered. She tried making her wings impervious in one direction to gravity, light-pressure and so forth. Woosh! She went flying through space so fast it frightened her.

"Lawks! I'm a space-bird!" she laughed. "I don't need a ship to take me from Mars to Deimos!"

She looked with pitying condescension at the humans fighting their hopeless fight against her colleagues, the other space-birds. She saw Vans, her husband, go shooting into space at the impact of a full-blooded charge in the back. That annoyed her. She might want him again one day. Stranger things had happened. Besides, who was to feed her now?

She flew after him, stopped his flight, put her head against his suit and made cooing noises.

"Thanks Olla," he said. "Where is the King? And Don?"

She had seen us batted into space. Miles away as the King was, Olla, getting into the right position, was able to pick out the sunlight reflected from his suit. By the time he had been towed back I had gone so far away that it was only with great difficulty that Olla's keen eyes were able to pick me out. She fetched me back too.

I awoke from a peaceful dream to find myself floating in space, Vans and Usulor in their suits beside me and Olla spreading her wings over all three of us to shade us from the sun. The space-birds were busily patching up the ship. We were to sunward of them, and consequently practically invisible to them against the blackness of space. Our suits were connected by telephone wires. Olla had produced from a pocket or something she kept tucked under a wing a slate she used to communicate with Vans.

"I'll tow you back to Mars," she wrote.

We all three protested. What about Wimpolo?

Olla thought we had better give up hope of Wimpolo. Usulor protested stoutly. As long as there was any chance that she was still alive we would not leave her. Vans and I, of course, agreed.

All this while the ship and ourselves had been drifting towards Deimos. The little world was as prominent as Mars in the sky now. The ship was clearly still making for Deimos.

"Ancient Martian history tells of colonies on Deimos, of cities, air-plants and supplies left intact when the place was evacuated," Usulor told us. "Many thousands of years ago, of course. But most of it is probably still usable."

"Why was the world evacuated?" I asked.

"Because of radiations, the old books say. That might mean cosmic rays, or ultra-violet or radium emanations. It might mean almost anything."

We resumed our journey to Deimos, towed now by the wings of the grumbling Olla.

"All this trouble over that cat of a Princess," she grumbled. But her words were only bird twitterings to us.

AS WE got nearer to Deimos we saw that what looked like disks of pale green glass were dotted about the surface of the tiny world, some of them miles in diameter.

"Air and temperature traps," Usulor explained. "Former Martian colonies. Radiant heat goes in through the glass-site readily but seeps out only very slowly."

I could easily understand that. I have grown tomatoes in a hothouse or greenhouse. On Deimos men had tried

to live in giant greenhouses. Without much success, it appeared.

Olla's slender legs must have been as strong as steel. Gripping Usulor and me in the claws of one leg and Vans in the other she could apply the most terrific acceleration or deceleration to us. It was uncanny to watch her, slender wings stretched wide and motionless, a mere effort of volition causing the invisible forces of the universe to operate so powerfully at her bidding. We tried to sleep, so as to conserve our oxygen supply, but the acceleration strain was heavy. And all the while those dazzling white wings fended off from us the cruel, burning heat of the sun.

After a long, long journey we reached Deimos. A desert, uninviting world, apart from the hothouse colonies. Jagged mountains, thin air, polar ice-caps, no extensive seas, some stunted vegetation in the valleys. No place for a honeymoon.

Flying in an orbit some fifty miles above the surface we saw the space-ship resting inside one of the larger "hothouses."

"Shall we land nearby?" I asked Usulor.

"Best find a usable hothouse about a hundred miles away, if we can. No trouble to come closer in this light gravity."

The gravity of Deimos is very slight indeed. I believe Vans could have stood on its surface and thrown a stone so hard that it would never come down at all.

Most of the hothouses were barren and empty. Glassite covers had become cracked or chipped from various causes, letting the air out. Some were a riot of giant mildew and fungi. Others a profusion of tropical vegetation, giant tree-ferns, trailing vines and gorgeous flowers many yards across. Everything was on an enormous scale, due to the light gravity I suppose.

"Air in some of these must be foul and poisonous," Usulor reflected. "We can judge the quality of the air only by the vegetation growing within. All our instruments are on the ship. Which of these hot spots would you consider the most wholesome-looking, Prince Don?"

I selected one full of tree-ferns. I chose it because I saw ripples made by some swimming creature in the water and small animals moving among the tall grass. Where other animals could live, I argued, so could we. The others agreed.

We hunted for an air-lock. We found one at last. It had ten successive compartments before the dome itself was reached. Those ancient Martian colonists had been very careful. Necessary, I suppose.

And the air inside was good. An excellent drop of air. Ozone-laden, free of carbon-dioxide and flavored with flower perfumes and pollen. It only wanted a salt-sea tang to make it perfect.

If you want to know what I mean by an excellent drop of air, try breathing some after hours and hours in one of the stinking, cramped ovens they call space-suits.

Honest, I've never tasted a better drop of air.

WE felt cheerful at once, light-hearted and even partly light-headed. I remember offering to carry Vans round the perimeter of the hothouse. I did lift him off the ground. Which, remembering that Vans would have registered more than a ton on the scales on Earth, shows how very light Deimos gravity is. Vans offered to throw me "clean off the globe," so that Olla would have to fetch me back.

"And crack the glassite dome and let the air out," Usulor put in. "Ha, ha, ha!" he roared, throwing up stones so that they rang noisily against the dome so high above.

Then we all tried seeing how high we could jump. Vans and the King looked so ungainly, jumping, that I roared with laughter, and so did they. And the raucous shrieks of merriment from the flamingo sounded above us all.

Vans went for a swim in the pool, and came ashore with a big blue swelling where some poisonous creature in the water had stung him. We looked at it and roared with laughter, and so did he.

Then we all went to sleep. . . .

"Ho, ho, ho!"

Van's mighty roar of laughter woke me up. He was standing before me stark naked, and laughing. I jumped to my feet, forgetting the light gravity, and soared high in the air before I came down in the branches of a tree-fern.

I looked down, and roared with laughter again.

The Emperor of Mars was stark naked, too. And when I looked at the flamingo, so was she. She appeared to have been plucked. Not a vestige of feather remained on her.

Then I found that I was naked, too. Not only that, but all the hair of my head was gone. I was bald, and so were Vans and Usulor.

"Some chemical in the air dissolved away our clothes and hair and her feathers," chuckled Usulor, tears of merriment running from his eyes.

I looked for our space-suits. They too had been attacked. All cloth, rubber, fur or leather parts were gone. Only the helmets remained usable.

Looking closely, I found that tiny beetles were devouring remnants of the leather parts of the suits. The green dome was full of tiny insects that devoured all dead animal and vegetable matter. Now I knew why not a single dead leaf or branch was to be seen amongst all this tropical vegetation. Lucky for us it was that they left all living substances alone. Otherwise we might have been eaten alive while we lay in the drugged sleep produced by the chemicals of radioactive Deimos.

We had had nothing to eat for a long while. It did not seem to matter. Our drugged brains did not know we were hungry. Everything seemed a huge joke.

I suppose we would have laughed until we died if that native curiosity of mine had not woke up. That inquisitiveness that used once upon a time to get me into so much trouble saved all four of us.

IT happened like this. I found a metal door almost hidden by the tropical vegetation. And, of course, I fiddled with handles and locks until I got it open. And, of course, I went in, found myself in a low metal building. Leaves nearly covered the windows, so I put the light on. I saw more handles to fiddle with, and I fiddled.

Presently I heard a hiss, and I was very amused.

This building happened to be the air-making plant of this particular dome. The actual air-making machinery had been mostly eaten away long before, but it happened that there was a store of air in metal containers under pressure. This was what I had tapped. It might just as easily have been something poisonous.

The building filled with clean air. The drug-laden air of the dome went out through the cracks. I sat and laughed, and slowly sanity came back to me.

What was I laughing at? I found I

did not know. I discovered that I was extremely hungry, parched with thirst and stung all over by a million vicious insects. And, worst of all, I didn't know what had happened to Wimpolo, my Martian bride.

The realization of the true position was so bitter that I almost went out to bury myself in that drugged oblivion again.

What was I to do?

I tried to think.

I had to get Vans and the other two in here to get the drug out of their brains too. That meant exposing myself to the poisonous air again.

I went out.

"Vans!" I cried, urgently. "We are all drugged. Poisoned! Come with me! I'll get you right again."

"What is the little Earthling talking about?" rumbled Vans, laughing. And grabbed at my bare shoulder to throw me in the air, starting some ridiculous game again.

I felt the drug getting hold of me again. It was useless trying to get those gigantic Martians into the air chamber by force. Dodging Vans, I ran back.

He did not try to follow.

What was I to do?

Trying to persuade them was useless. I shouted to them, but nothing seemed to make them understand. All they could understand were silly games and pranks. Only by showing them some new game could I interest them.

Was that the way? It was worth trying.

I began to roar with forced laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha! This is funny! Oh, come in here. You never saw anything so funny in your life! Come and see my new game! Ha, ha, ha!"

It was hard work. But presently I got Vans interested. He strolled over.

"Where! What's this game, Earthling?"

"In here. Come inside and I'll show you."

He came in, sniffing as he detected the difference in the air.

"Where? What is it?" he demanded, all eagerness.

"There!" I pointed at the air-tap. "Put your head there."

He did. I shot a jet of clean air right in his face.

He roared with pretended anger, and tried to catch me. I dodged him.

Presently he came more slowly. The silly grin faded off his face. A look of puzzlement came into it.

The drug was being worked out of his system.

"What has been happening, Don?" he asked.

"The air of this dome is poisonous," I said. "Get King Usulor in here."

VANS dashed out, picked up the lesser giant in his arms and carried him in. Usulor struggled, but Vans slapped his face as one might slap a naughty child. He nearly knocked the King out. Vans does not realize his own strength.

The question of the flamingo worried me, but, seeing us all in this metal building she presently followed of her own accord.

Presently we were all sitting very sober, looking at each other and wondering what to do next.

"How much more air is there in those tanks?"

"Not much."

"Then we'll have to get out of this dome."

"We need space suits for that. Ours are done for."

"Not completely. The helmets are all right, I think."

"Get what's left of them, and we'll

see what can be done."

Vans dashed out and got them. The helmets were all right.

By wrapping a lot of large leaves bound with creepers round our necks the helmets could be made to supply air for perhaps fifteen minutes. Under Deimos conditions of feeble gravity one could go a long way in fifteen minutes.

"Our bodies would be exposed to very thin air, almost amounting to a vacuum," I said.

"I understand," Usulor said, "that perfectly healthy bodies can withstand exposure to a vacuum much better than is commonly supposed. At any rate, we have no choice. We have to take a chance."

"And our feet on the rocks," I said. "Those stones may be either frigidly cold or at furnace heat."

"We shall have to wrap our feet round and round with big leaves."

"Seems to me it would be best to wrap our entire bodies with leaves until we look like Egyptian mummies," I said.

They did not know what Egyptian mummies were, but they understood what I meant. In a series of quick dashes, holding their breath, the two gathered huge supplies of leaves and creepers. We began to swathe ourselves.

"Where shall we go?"

Vans suggested a nearby dome.

"Looks to me as though there is no air in it," Usulor said.

"That one, then."

"Full of fungus," I said. "Doesn't look wholesome to me."

"What about that one?"

"Yeah! Bung full of snakes and wild cats."

THERE wasn't an attractive-looking dome in sight. We had to make up our minds beforehand and go straight to our objective. Once outside there would be no time to waste.

"What about Olla?" I suggested. "She can withstand exposure to an airless vacuum. Let her pick out a nice dome for us and lead us there."

The flamingo was willing. Unable now to fly, she raced over the rocks on her long legs. Presently she was back, flapping her featherless wings and beckoning with one leg.

Three figures wrapped head to foot in leaves came out of the lock and ran in a series of long leaps across the surface of almost airless Deimos. With each step we went about forty feet, came down slowly, kicked vigorously backwards, with both feet, soared again.

With great exertion we reached Olla's dome. She had chosen well. There was not much vegetation. The air was not too rich in oxygen and had rather a lot of carbon-dioxide. Rather like a stuffy room. It made one feel tired. But it was safer like that. There was less likely to be dangerous animal life in such an atmosphere.

In another way we were just in time, too. The sun set. Abruptly, it was dark.

"Don!" called Vans. "See that light over there? It does not look like a star to me."

I looked, and felt a thump at the heart.

"No, Vans. It is the light in the airplant of the first dome. We forgot to put it out."

"It shows up brilliantly in the dark. In the daylight it seemed to be completely obscured by the vegetation. Now, it shows up like a searchlight. If any space-birds are about they will be certain to see it."

"It must be put out. Send Olla."

Olla, good bird, went without a word of complaint. We could see many more lights now.

"Looks bad," I said.

Vans grunted gloomily.

Presently Olla came back. Without surprise we read the report she wrote on her slate. The light of Mars, in the sky, was just enough to enable us to read her large writing.

She had been unable to get near our former dome. Space-birds were all around it. They did not go in, but shone searchlights into it from space. Others were going from dome to dome, examining each one with searchlights. Presently they would reach us.

Now we wished that Olla had not chosen the dome so carefully. She had picked out a dome with little vegetation. It was safer for several reasons. But now we wished she hadn't. There was nowhere to hide.

"In the water," said Vans.

It was an idea. I had often heard of men hiding in water, lying on their backs with just their nostrils and mouths above the surface. The Martians and Olla, able to hold their breath for a very long time, could go right under.

As the searchlights came near we slid into the clammy, slimy water. There was a coat of scum to it and the bottom was soft mud.

Searchlights played around the dome. My eyes, nose and mouth were full of scum. My head was slipping under the surface. I tried to raise myself, but could not.

I was sinking into the soft mud at the bottom of the little pool. Already my arms and legs were deeply embedded. I could not move them. I could not free myself.

Waves disturbed the water. Slight at first, they increased. I guessed that Vans and Usulor were trapped the same as I was. There didn't seem to be so many searchlights now. Or perhaps I could not see them so well for the scum.

I got a mouthful of foul water.

A rounded grey boulder, so different from the jagged rocks of Deimos, reared itself up slowly out of the water and gazed at me with sad eyes.

Or was it a sea-lion?

CHAPTER VI

Wimpolo's Escape

PRINCESS WIMPOLO gradually came to herself on an acceleration-resisting couch. Her space-suit had been taken away. A notice on the door said, "Do not open. No air outside."

She pulled a plug out of a ventilation hole. An instant whistling of air out of the room told her that the notice spoke truthfully. She replaced the plug hastily.

Then she noticed the glass panel in the door. A parrot-like face was there, laughing soundlessly at her.

Somehow, Wimpolo could not get used to the space-birds. The sight of their weird animal faces close up gave her a shock every time.

The parrot-like face moved away, or was pushed away, and bear-like face took its place. That, in turn, was pushed away by a creature with the head of a horse. And all were laughing.

A whole crowd of space-birds was in the corridor outside, jostling one another out of the way to gape and laugh at her.

It must have been tough on Wimpolo, who is a good girl so long as she gets her own way. All these creatures were making fun of her, and she couldn't get at them. She says she boiled with rage. I quite believe it. In the end she tried sitting with her back to them. Frequent peeps into her hand-mirror, pretending to put her nose or cheeks to rights, told her that the mocking space-birds were still there. Wimpolo was quite accus-

tomed to gaping crowds, but not under these circumstances. And all these space-birds had been criminals in the jails before her father tried the Evolution Machine on them.

Princess Wimpolo is the bravest girl I have ever known. But this got her down. The poor girl was very worried as to what had happened to her dad and Vans and me. But she would not dream of asking those space-birds.

After an hour or so she discovered that the corridor was empty. Then she heard a voice, curiously squeaky. It was not a normal voice, but sounded more like a space-bird whose mouth and throat were still capable of human speech. There were some, particularly among the parrot-like creatures, who could talk fluently.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we bring you the finest entertainment since we made our home on Deimos. Princess Wimpolo, daughter of the man who threw us into noisesome jails and who changed us into our present forms for his idle amunsement, is, as you all know, a prisoner aboard this vessel. We show you her shut in her compartment. Some of you are watching her through the transparent panel in the door, but only one at a time can see her that way. She has turned her back on them. She doesn't know that we have three movie cameras trained on her through holes in the wall. Watch her! See the proud tossing of her chin. See her biting her lips. See the tears in her eyes that she tries in vain to hide. This is the greatest entertainment. . . ."

WHEN her temper cooled down a bit she wondered how it was she was able to hear the words. The ship must be full of air again. She pulled out a plug. No sound of whistling air came to her. She passed her hand over the hole. No marked current of air could she feel. Air pressure outside was equal to that inside.

In a moment she moved furniture to cover up the three spy-holes of the cameras, busted open the door by hurling her half ton of beef against it until it broke, and went out.

Yes, Wimp is a hefty girl. When she moves she moves.

She had made rather a lot of noise. She heard space-birds coming. She dashed along the corridor and into another door.

Space-birds rushed along the corridor. She heard their cries of surprise at the broken door. She heard them begin to search for her.

She had to think quickly. No good hideout was near. I doubt if she looked for one. To a Martian, accustomed to living in everlasting night, the first idea in that sort of jam is always to put out the light. In a moment she had put out the lighting system of the ship. Pulling a light-bulb with one hand she dabbed a well-moistened finger of the other hand on the naked terminals. The lights fused at once. She says her finger was not hurt.

The side of the ship away from the sun was in darkness, apart from a pale glimmer from stars, Mars and Deimos. Wimpolo went boldly along the corridor.

She had gone some way when the lights suddenly came on again. The only space-bird near was a stork-like creature. It gaped at her in amazement.

Wimpolo grabbed it at once, one hand gripping its beak so that it couldn't make a squawk and the other trying to hold its wings.

"Be good and I won't hurt you," Wimpolo panted.

The stork was quiet.

Wimpolo hustled it into a nearby small compartment. The stork produced a slate and began to write.

"I am only a poor girl," it wrote, in ungrammatical Martian, "I never stole the money. And my dad was dying and needed expensive treatment to save him. And they put me in jail. Then the King made me into one of these winged things that don't have to breathe."

"Poor thing," Wimpolo sympathized. "I'll see that you are pardoned as soon as I can manage to get back."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Take me to my room, where my wardrobe is. Have you seen it?"

"Oooh! Not half! All furs and feather hats and dresses."

"Can you get me there?"

"Oh no! I couldn't!" She seemed frightened.

"Yes you can. If I took everything off, and then rode on your back, nestling well down into your feathers, you could fly me there without my being seen."

"Oh I couldn't! Tarbuss would have me plucked."

"Who is Tarbuss?"

"The boss of us space-birds. The flying horse."

Wimpolo remembered suddenly. Lemor Tarbuss had been a brigand and most dangerous criminal. So now he was the "big shot" among the space-birds. She should have foreseen it. But it made things look bad.

THREATENING to wring the stork's slender neck, Wimpolo bullied it into agreeing to carry her. Wimpolo had judged right. The space-birds were of all shapes, kinds and sizes. What showed of Wimpolo's pink flesh among the stork's feathers was not noticed in the stork's rapid flight to Wimpolo's room. Wimpolo dashed into her wardrobe.

Furs and feathers of all kinds were here. How could she wrap herself in them so as to pass among the space-birds as one of themselves?

There was a loud noise outside. Loud squawks and a beating of wings. She pushed the door open and looked out.

The treacherous stork was calling to the other space-birds telling them where Princess Wimpolo was hidden.

The only heavy objects handy were two magnetic boots. Wimpolo picked them up and threw them hard. One crashed into the far wall, but the other hit the stork at the base of the neck, making her turn somersaults in the air.

Wimpolo set herself hastily at the job of disguising herself as a space-bird. A tigerskin provided two furry legs. Pulled over her own legs like stockings, they made her legs look like a tiger's legs, as long as they did not fall off. Another skin round her shoulders gave her the front legs of a bear to cover her arms. A headdress of feathers, purposely disarranged so as to hide most of her face, a feathery cape, that could be held out in her arm to represent wings, there! that was the best she could do. At all events, she looked weird enough, in her full-length mirror. She grabbed a handful of fasteners, in case anything fell off, and dashed out.

The stork was sitting on the floor, holding her neck and squawking. Several space-birds were round her, trying to find out what was the matter. Luckily she could not talk to them, only squawk and point. Until she calmed her silly head enough to write on a slate she would not be able to tell them where Wimpolo had gone. Wimpolo hurried away. It was awkward without magnetic shoes, but there was a very light gravity just holding her to the floor.

"Where are you going? What do you think you're doing? Why don't you fly?" rasped a hoarse voice suddenly.

Startled, she nearly answered. That would have given her away. She saw that the speaker was one of the parrot-

headed freaks who could still produce reasonable imitations of human voices.

Wimpolo fluttered her "wings," not daring to make a noise with her mouth.

"Write on your slate! Why can't you write on your slate, you silly owl?" rasped the "parrot."

Wimpolo fluttered some more.

"What's the matter now? Lost your slate?"

Wimpolo nodded.

"You silly, useless, careless owl! You ought to be plucked! Do you hear me? You ought to be plucked! Here, take my slate."

WIMPOLO, awkwardly because of the bearskin in the way of her fingers, wrote, "I've hurt my wings."

"Haaak!" squawked the parrot. "Another accident! Nothing but accidents! Collisions, collisions, collisions! Sheer carelessness I call it! I'd pluck every one of them! Wheeeeeeeee!"

The parrot suddenly produced a whistle from somewhere and blew on it. Two powerful space-birds appeared.

"Take this silly owl to the casualty ward," ordered the parrot. "And tell the doctor I recommend her to be plucked."

They picked her up and carried her.

Wimpolo, whose heart had been thumping painfully, breathed more easily. Her disguise had deceived the parrot. That meant it must be pretty good.

She found herself in the largest compartment of the space-ship. It had been fitted up as an emergency hospital. Several injured space-birds were waiting for attention. Their powers of very rapid movement, as well as the sudden acceleration of the space-ship, apparently caused many accidents.

Wimpolo was given her choice of sitting on a perch or on the floor. A few moments later a stork was brought in, a stork who had an injured neck and was making a lot of fuss about it.

"Injury caused by a metal boot," announced a parrot-headed attendant to a space-bird who sat at a table writing. "Boot stated to have been thrown by the escaped girl, Princess Wimpolo."

At once there were squawks of sympathy and clustering of rubbernecks around the stork. Wimpolo took advantage of the excitement to slip out of another door.

The rockets had been silent for some while, yet there was a light gravity pull. That could mean only one thing, the space-ship had landed on Deimos.

She went into a small air-lock and let herself out. Overhead was a green glass roof and before her a little town of stone and brick houses, mostly in ruin but some of it still in use. The ground was about two hundred feet below her.

She jumped lightly down.

CHAPTER VII

Birds, Beetles and Bommelsmeth

WHILE my bride was behaving in this lively fashion we three men of the party had got ourselves hopelessly stuck in the mud in one of the smaller air-traps of Deimos. Searchlights of the watching space-birds shone down through glassite dome. They found me, and one beam shone full on me, dazzling. But no space-birds came to the airlock. I realized that the space-birds intended to watch me, and all of us, drown in the mud and water.

The water splashed with the struggles of Vans and Usulor, who, like me, were trying to free themselves of the clutching mud. Then I felt a big mouth, full of teeth, close over the toes of my left foot. Some water creature had got hold of me, crocodile, snake or big fish. I could not even snatch my foot away, as

the heel was deeply embedded.

But my toes were not bitten off. Instead the creature, whatever it was, gently tugged my foot out of the mud. Then it freed the other one. Then a steady pull, and I was slowly tugged free of the mud, out into deep water.

The creature, whatever it was, towed me across the little pool to a shingle beach on the other side. When I felt firm bottom and was released I scrambled to my feet.

I owed my rescue to a big sea-lion. Bommelsmeth! He had turned up in the most unlikely place at the very moment when he was most needed.

The sea-lion looked at me, gave a bark of satisfaction, winked broadly, and lumbered back into deeper water. A minute or two later he towed Usulor ashore, and then Vans. Giving us all a bark of greeting and a broad wink, he splashed into deep water and dived.

"What's he winking at?" Vans asked me.

"Pleased with himself at rescuing us from certain death," I suggested. "Or amused to find us all naked, flamingo and all."

"He meant more than that," Vans insisted. "But, not being a man now, he can't speak as you or I would. He's got some surprise for us."

Vans walked thoughtfully round the pool and bent down a small tree until the flamingo was able to grip it in her beak and pull herself free.

Meanwhile the space-birds were crowding in through the airlock. There were dozens of them, and every fifth one carried a searchlight. Vans picked up a large stone and threw it.

The space-birds dodged.

With the terrific force of Vans' throw and the slight gravity of Deimos the heavy stone crashed into the roof of the dome. Throwing things about is dangerous where gravity is slight. Weight is reduced but inertia remains the same. Instead of falling the missile goes on and on, and it hits just as hard. The roof broke, with a tinkle of falling glassite.

A raucous parrot screamed out at us. It was the first time we had known that any of the space-birds could talk.

"Ha, ha, ha! Look what you've done! You've let the air out of the dome!"

SPACE-BIRDS wheeled around us, laughing. We looked for stones to throw at them. There were very few stones about. One of the creatures swept low and screamed in my face. While I was trying to defend myself from the ferocious peck or the arm-breaking wing blow I expected another swooped behind me, seized my ankle in his claws and lifted me off the ground. Upsidedown I was carried over the pool and dropped into deep water.

"That's the idea," screamed the parrot-head. "Wash them! We can't take them before Tarbuss in that muddy state!"

Vans and Usulor were dropped in beside me, followed by the flamingo.

"I'll wring all your necks," Vans was sputtering.

"It's no use, Vans," Usulor said. "I know when I'm beaten. With no death-ray to defend myself with I'll fight with a sword, or even with sticks and stones, but when I haven't even a pair of socks, then I give in."

"How would you like to be left here?" squawked the parrot-head. "Air is whistling out. In about fifteen minutes you would all die of lack of air. If we save you will you promise to make no attempt to escape?"

We all promised, Vans in a most sullen manner, and were picked out of the pool. We were taken into the airlock, where presently clothes and space-

suits were brought to us. It was good to be dressed again, although our bodies were still dampish.

"These are off our ship," Usulor declared. "That means that the ship is on Deimos."

The same idea had occurred to me.

"Where is Wimpolo?" I demanded of the parrot-head.

"Attempted to escape in space," rasped the parrot-head.

"How? Why? Tell me what happened!" I demanded.

"If any of the four opens a mouth again," ordered the parrot-head, "teach them manners. They are not Emperor, wrestling champion and Prince Consort while they are on Deimos. They are three criminals charged with vile crimes and about to pay the penalty."

"Look here," Usulor said. "If you will return us to Mars I will have you all pardoned, set my scientists seeking ways of changing you back to your original forms and meanwhile have you cared for in well-appointed aviaries."

"Silence him!" screeched the parrot-head.

A powerful wing struck the Emperor of Mars a heavy blow on the legs.

Then we were all carried on the backs of space-birds. The flamingo, of course, didn't need a spacesuit but wore one of Wimpolo's fur coats round her featherless form.

WE had given our word not to try to escape, but that didn't mean much. It was all we could do to hang on to the slithery backs of the space-birds as they wheeled and zoomed. Showing off I think. With the almost unlimited powers of the universe at their beck and call by a mere effort of volition they could stop and start, turn, or stall in a manner that would make a taxi-driver of Paris green with envy. For all our holding on we were several times shot over the heads or tails of our steeds, to be picked up by other space-birds. All to the accompaniment of hearty but silent laughter. Because of course there was no sound out here in airless space.

It was our turn to laugh when two of them collided with a wing-shattering crash.

Dizzily we swooped down on the largest dome of Deimos. It was miles across, tremendously thick, and divided into many separate compartments by transparent walls crossing it. In the event of damage to the dome above all doors into the damaged compartments would automatically close, preventing loss of air from other compartments. There was a fairly large city here, partly in ruins. Many of the buildings were now being used by the space-birds, particularly one building originally intended, aparently, as a palace. Martian architecture runs to palaces a lot, with rounded domes, zig-zag, curved, coiled and swan-necked columns. I'm no architect, but light gravity permits of a playing about with architectural forms that would be quite impossible on Earth.*

Into the big palace we were taken. It was very comfortably furnished, although on a plan long ago out-moded on Mars. In the vast hall space-birds of various forms rested on perches, in stalls, on cushions or in whatever manner was best suited to their particular

* Here, with practically no gravity at all, that tendency had gone to extremes Imagine the carved neck of a swan in repose, and, resting on the very tip of the beak, a house. Imagine a very lavish use of bright paints and pigments in a dust-free, windless, rainless atmosphere. Imagine a huge statue of a fisherman gazing in amazement at an ornate house that nests on his protruding tongue. Imagine houses perched dizzily thousands of feet in the air. With no stairs or ladders, because a light spring will carry you right up to them. And warnings everywhere against throwing stones or other heavy objects. "Remember! One thrown stone may cost a thousand lives!"—Ed.

forms. There was even a large swimming pool in the middle of the floor, with swimming birds such as swans on it and storks standing on one leg.

And on the big throne a winged horse sat with crossed legs and munched hay that an attendant space-bird handed him. He did not stop eating when we entered.

Our spacesuits were taken off us.

"Lemor Tarbuss," announced Usulor, "I, Emperor and Overlord of Mars, offer you and your people a free pardon and good homes on Mars until such time—"

"Speak when you are spoken to," squawked a parrothead. A wing struck Usulor's thighs, stingingly.

Lemor Tarbuss, or the winged horse, went on eating. At last he finished, took a long drink out of a golden bucket, offered his muzzle to an attendant for his mustache to be wiped, began to smoke an enormous cigar and allowed his mocking gaze to rest on us. Then he began a series of swift whinnyings and neighings, all without taking the cigar out of his mouth.

"His Majesty," declared a parrothead, rather a moth-eaten parrothead who appeared to be moulting, "says that you may be Emperor and Overlord of Mars, but he is Emperor of Deimos. Your absurd offers do not interest him nor any of us, because he is in a position to take everything you can offer him without your help. Here on Deimos, although Tarbuss is our Emperor, we have a system of democracy. You are accused of confining us all to noisesome jails in Mars for trivial offenses and often on false accusations. You are accused of depriving us of our human forms and turning us into the freaks we are, to suffer and die, as you thought, cut off from humanity, freaks, pariahs, outcasts and monsters."

"I'm willing to do what I can to put that right," declared Usulor, unbending, proudly.

THE moulting parrothead flapped its wings vigorously. A shower of feathers flew out leaving it more moth-eaten than ever. I understood now why the place was littered with feathers of all sorts. Nearly all these space-birds were moulting.

"We are not interested in your offers," the parrothead interpreted the neighings and whinneyings of Tarbuss. "We are going to give you a dose of your own medicine. We are going to subject all four of you to the Evolution Machine and make of you four of the weirdest freaks ever imagined."

"This is no justice!" I cried. "We've had no trial."

"What justice did we have? Ask him!" Tarbuss pointed with one hoof at Usulor. "But you shall have a trial, right now. My space-birds, all of you! You have heard the evidence. I constitute you all jurymen. If it is your opinion that the prisoners are guilty say so."

A babble of squawking, hooting and whistling filled the air.

"If any of you dares to hold the opinion that they are not guilty let him say so and share their fate. Who says the prisoners are not guilty?"

Naturally, there was silence.

"There you are! That is at least as fair a trial as most of us had. Seize them, my birds! Carry out the sentence!"

Space-birds began to run towards us in a flurry of flying feathers.

"Dad! Dad! Don! Vans!"

It was the voice of Princess Wimpolo. It came from the nearest space-bird. This space-bird had the hind legs of a tiger, the front legs of a bear and head and wings of ostrich feathers. Much of this disguise was falling off as she

ran, revealing the face and form of my gigantic but darling bride.

"Take these!" she cried.

From her hands we snatched four deathray boxes. Then we faced the swarming space-birds back to back, Wimpolo in the middle.

Tarbuss dived backwards off his throne.

"Fools," came the voice of the parrothead. "Though you now carry five deathrays a hundred rays unseen to you are covering you. Fire my birds, fire!"

All our five rays clicked on at once and swept round.

And, you know, nothing happened.

IT was an awful, sickening moment. I swept my deadly ray over a group of space-birds standing motionless, wings outspread, trying to fly but apparently unable to. Not one of them was affected. The terrible ray had let me down.

I looked inside, and saw why. The inside of the box was in a state of ruin. Rubber insulators were gone, all wooden, cloth or rubber parts gone, crumbled away to powder.

I threw it down.

But neither had the deathrays of the space-birds harmed us.

"Seize them by hand," yelled the parrothead. "Your rays are useless, but so are theirs! Seize them! Carry out the sentence!"

"I wouldn't advise you to," announced a deep, icy voice.

Bommelsmeth had just walked into the hall. Not Bommelsmeth the sea-lion but Bommelsmeth the man. Bommelsmeth the lesser king of Mars who fought so long to usurp Usulor's throne as overlord of the whole planet. He wore only a singlet and shorts made, it appeared, of tin. In his hand was a deathray.

"I wouldn't advise you to, Emperor Tarbuss," he repeated, very heavily and sarcastically.

I thought he looked, at that moment, more dignified and kingly than Usulor had ever done.

"And why not? And who are you?" rasped the parrothead.

"Never mind who I am. Thanks to the discoveries of King Usulor," he bowed stiffly, "of myself, and of you, you imitation King, I have succeeded in regaining my natural form. Or regaining it, however, with an evolved brain that now sees my former warlike activities as crude, primitive folly." Again he bowed towards Usulor. "In answer to your other question I give three replies.

"Firstly, because I happen to carry the only efficient deathray in Deimos. You will be wise to do as I direct you.

"Secondly, because your wings are all coming to pieces. All your feathers and fur and that of every one of your birds is coming out. None of you appear to be able to fly any more."

It was obviously true. Not one of the space-birds was flying, although many were attempting to and showers of falling feathers were the only result.

"Thirdly," went on Bommelsmeth, "another space-ship from Mars is now only an hour's journey away. Observers on Mars, watching in telescopes, saw what happened to Emperor Usulor's ship, and another ship was hastily prepared to follow and rescue him and his party. Without deathrays and unable to fly, how do you expect to be able to defend yourself against Emperor Usulor's guards? And if they find that anything has happened to their King, his daughter or his son-in-law, what do you imagine your fate will be?"

Scornfully he glanced around. Tarbuss and his birds knew they were beaten.

My jacket felt oddly loose. I put a hand to it, and felt a large hole. It was falling to pieces. So were Vans' clothes and Usulor's and Princess Wimpolo's furs and feathers.

WITH a scream the half-naked girl ran behind a stone statue. So did Vans, Usulor and I. Bommelsmeth, in his tin singlet and trunks, remained in sole possession of the floor of the vast hall, among the half-naked space-birds.

"I'll get you tin suits the beetles won't eat," said Bommelsmeth, handing me the deathray.

Beetles! I understood at last. The palace was full of flying beetles, the same beetles as had eaten our clothes and the flamingo's feathers in the other dome. Somehow they had got in here, making the space-birds helpless.

"Yes," explained Bommelsmeth, smiling, "when the space-birds let all the air out of the space-ship I hid in the watertank. I knew my way about Deimos. I had read it up, which none of you had troubled to do. I knew that men had been driven off the little world by these clothes-eating insects thousands of years ago. I knew, too, that all the domes were connected by water pipes to an underground sea. Once I had escaped from the space-ship I was able to swim from dome to dome, catching millions of beetles and carrying them here where I stored them in tin trunks until I was ready. I saw you coming down, but could not locate you in time to warn you. When the searchlights of the space-birds revealed you to me I was unable to do much at the moment to help you. But excuse me. I have to save a lady from embarrassment."

He hurried away and brought back three large and one small tin suit. These tin suits had been used by former inhabitants of Deimos when clothes-eating beetles made ordinary clothes impossible.

Then we waited patiently for the space-ship and Usulor's guards to arrive. About an hour later a score or so of men arrived. Wimpolo, anticipating events, tactfully hid herself.

The guards reported to King Usulor, trying not to laugh at the spectacle of him in tin singlet and shorts or of the featherless, wingless space-birds all around. But when their own clothes fell off bit by bit, leaving them stark naked, they permitted themselves to make exclamations of surprise.

"Don't worry, gentlemen," said Usulor, soothingly. "The only lady in Deimos is my daughter, and she has carefully shut herself away. We will soon get tin suits for all of you."

Just then a lady walked in. It was Olla, in human form again.

There was a mad scamper to get behind pillars, statues, space-birds, anywhere.

"Where is Vans?" demanded Olla, smiling serenely. "Bommelsmeth has completely mastered the evolution ray now. He has changed me back into a woman again, more beautiful than ever. Where is Vans?"

Then a magnificent flamingo stalked in, only just beginning to moult. At the sight of Olla he gave a great squawk and a fluttering of wings.

"I'm Vans!" he wrote on a slate. "I used the Evolution Machine to change me, too, into a flamingo so that we could be together again. And now you are a girl once more. Come! Let us find Bommelsmeth again!"

They dashed off, hand in hand, greatly to the relief of Usulor's guards.

And I'm writing this in a terrible hurry, because the mail leaves for Earth very soon. Usulor has promised to reform the administration of justice in

Mars, to change back and to release all space-birds who have been unjustly sentenced and not to use the Evolution Machine any more except by the consent of the subject. Our space-ship has halted on the surface of Mars for a thorough fumigation before we go in. Those immodest beetles are not wanted inside Mars.

Wimpolo says we are going to take another space-ship and finish our interrupted honeymoon on Phobos, the other moon of Mars.

Did you ever know such a girl?

«REAL UNDERGROUND WORLD»

By ALLEN CURTIS

Stranger than fiction is this story of the largest salt mine in the world!

FOR years now you have read in these pages of strange unearthly doings which have taken place under the surface of the earth. Well, now you can banish any skepticism which you may have had because there actually exists such a thing as an underground city. It isn't way off in some remote corner of India or in the wilds of Java, but right here in these good old United States of ours—right in the state of New York to be exact, and not much more than twenty miles from the city of Rochester. In fact it is directly below the city of Retsof, a hamlet so small that the map makers, well, they just forgot it.

Precisely 1,073 feet below the hamlet of Retsof lies one of the world's most fantastic industrial wonders, the western world's largest salt mine. It squirms and crawls over more than 1,000 subterranean acres and aggregates a virtual metropolis of salt as vast as Lower New York City. A vast array of machinery, all working underground, clanks and groans, grades and sorts the salt. In November of 1939 the Subterranean Salt City turned out 30 carloads, or 2,500,000 pounds of salt.

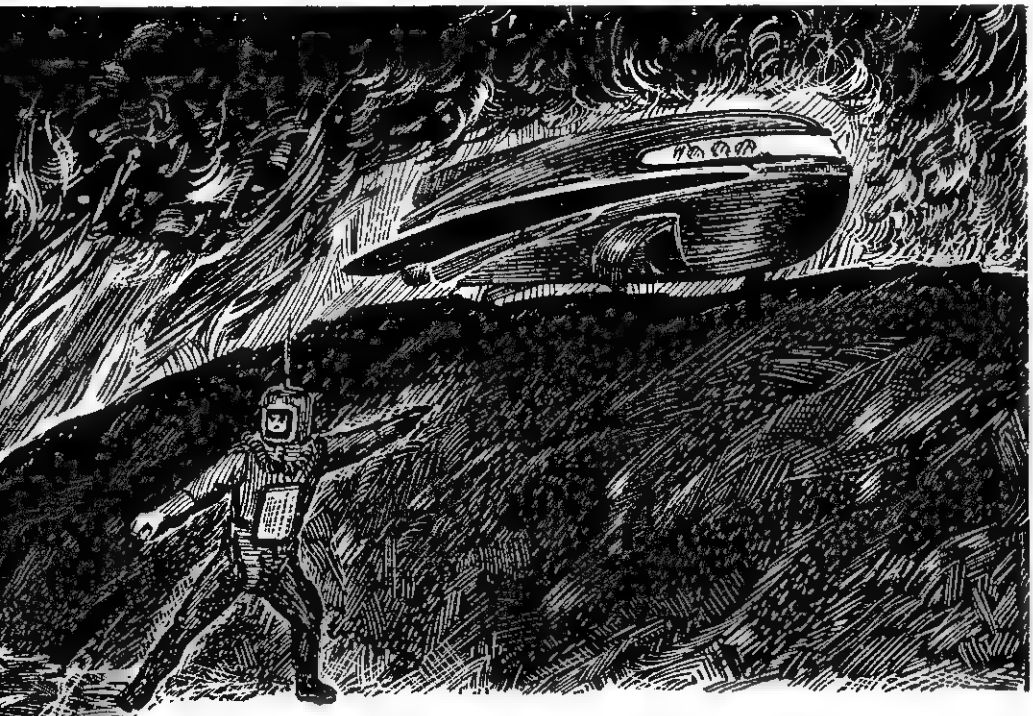
Going down into the strange salt city takes a full two minutes. There, 1,073 feet below the ground, you find yourself in a real underground office and drafting room with floor, walls and ceiling cut from solid rock salt. But for the queer salt walls, you find it no different from any other factory. Here nature keeps the temperature rigidly at 63 degrees Fahrenheit, regardless of how hot or cold it is "up above."

Unlike most coal mines you can walk over the entire 15-mile perimeter of the mine without bumping your head. Some of the mine's corridors extend for more than a mile and a half in one direction; and, covering this vast system snakes the rails of a real subway complete with brilliantly illuminated platforms and rib-crushing crowds during the "rush hour," which takes place when the workmen change shifts.

TREASURE ON

Then, suddenly the Fieries were swarming around us

THUNDER MOON



by EDMOND HAMILTON

It's hell to be told 37 is too old to fly the void when you know where a great treasure lies

"MAYBE there's a chance," John North thought desperately. "If they just don't think I'm too old—"

North's small, compact figure, shabby in a frayed black synthe-wool suit, threaded between the docks of towering space liners and through hurrying officials, swaggering young space-men, and sweating porters, until he reached the impressive offices of the Company.

The operations office of the Interplanetary Metal and Minerals Company, that giant corporation known everywhere as simply "the Company," was a massive block of glittering chromaloy. Beyond it lay the towering warehouses and docks and cranes that handled the cargoes from other worlds.

John North paused outside the entrance to inspect his reflection in the polished metal wall, earnestly smoothing his worn jacket. His heart sank as he looked at his own image. His dark hair was faintly thin at the temples, his black eyes had tired lines around them, his tanned face looked thin and pinched and old.

"Thirty-seven isn't old!" he told himself fiercely. "Even for a space-man,

it's not old. I've got to look young, *feel* young!"

But it wasn't easy to feel young, with the hunger he had felt all afternoon gnawing at him, with foreboding of failure gripping him, with his shoulders sagging from twenty years of toil and hardship and heartbreak.

"Straighten up—that's it," North muttered. "Look spruce, alert, efficient. And smile."

Yet he couldn't keep the mechanical smile on his drawn, old-young face as he made his way through busy chrommium corridors to the office of the new operations manager. He waited there for what seemed an eternity, fighting the hunger-born dizziness that threatened him. At last he was admitted.

Harker, the new manager, was a gimlet-eyed, tight-mouthed man of forty who sat behind a big desk reading off a materials list to a respectful young secretary. He looked up impatiently when North nervously cleared his throat.

"John North, sir, applying for a berth," North stated, trying to look the picture of a clean-cut efficient spaceman. "I'm a licensed S.O."

"Space Officer, eh?" said Harker. "Well, we can use a few good pilots now on the Jupiter run. Let's see your certificate."

It was the moment North had dreaded. Slowly he handed over the frayed, folded document. His shoulders sagged slightly as he waited.

The manager turned the frayed certificate over, his gimlet eyes starting to read the service-record on its back. He looked up suddenly.

"Thirty-seven y e a r s old!" he snapped. He tossed the document onto the desk. "What did you come in here for? Don't you know that the Company never hires a man over twenty-five?"

John North tried hard to keep his mechanical smile. "I could be valuable to the Company, sir. I've had twenty years space experience."

"That's fifteen years too much," answered the manager brutally. "A spaceman's washed out at thirty. He doesn't have the coordination, quickness of reaction or alertness of a younger man. We don't trust our ships to worn-out, middle-aged men who can't meet emergencies."

John North felt his faint hope expire. This new operations manager had the same viewpoint that all the others had had.

The young secretary was looking curiously at North. "You went to space twenty years ago? Why, that was in the earliest days of space travel. Half the planets hadn't even been visited, then."

North nodded dully. "My first voyage was with Mark Carew on his third expedition, in '98."

"And I suppose you think you're entitled to a big job because you were a hero twenty years ago?" demanded Harker hostilely. "That's the trouble with all you older space-men. You think because you happened to be on the first exploring expeditions, because you got a lot of publicity and hero-worship then, that you all rate captain's comets now."

"But I don't ask for a captain's berth," North protested. "It needn't even be an officer's post. I'll take any job a cyc-man, a tube-man, even a deck-hand."

He added in strained appeal, "I need this job, a lot. And space-sailing's the only trade I ever learned."

The manager snorted. "Too bad for you, that you didn't learn another trade. Anyway, even if you were young enough, the Company wouldn't want you. The old careless ways of you early space-men are out, these days.

Ships are operated scientifically now, with none of the hell-raising hit-or-miss tactics of you old timers. Things have changed."

North bit his lips and looked out of the window to repress his feelings. His tired eyes fixed on the soaring metal shaft that rose in the sunlight beyond the square bulk of the Company's warehouses.

It was the Monument to the Space Pioneers, that marked the spot where Gorham Johnson had returned from the first epochal space voyage years before. North's mind went back to the day when he himself had come back with Carew and landed there, the madly cheering throngs, the sententious speeches.

"Yes," North said dully. "You're right. Things have changed."

HE went out of the building blindly, clutching his useless certificate. Out in the sunlight and bustle of the spaceport, North paused.

The Venus liner whose big cigar-like bulk towered from its dock nearby was making ready for take-off. He could hear the staccato thunder of its tubes being tested. Passengers and porters and gray-jacketed Company officers were hurrying toward the ship. A few bewildered Venusians, white-skinned, handsome men, and one or two solemn native red Martians were in the throng. A band was beginning to play a gay, lilting tune.

North could remember when this had all been a bare field, twenty years ago. There had been nothing here then but the ramshackle hangar in which a score of eager young men had worked with crippled, indomitable Mark Carew to prepare an absurdly small and clumsy ship for the great voyage that was to add Saturn and Uranus and Neptune to the list of visited planets.

That was his trouble, North thought bitterly. He was always living in the past, the times twenty years ago when the world was young and the sun was bright, and all Earth was cheering him and his friends to new pioneering exploits.

"I've got to forget all that," he told himself heavily. "I've got to quit brooding on the past. But what am I going to do?"

He hated to go back to the shabby rooming house over on Killiston Avenue. Old Peters and Whitey and the others were hoping so fervently that he'd be able to get a berth today. They all needed the money so badly.

He shrugged wearily. They'd have to learn the bad news some time. He plodded off the spaceport, his slight, shabby figure unnoticed amid the excited, gay throng that had gathered to witness the take-off of the liner.

Killiston Avenue was one of the ruck of shabby streets around the spaceport. Its drab space-men's lodging houses, drinking joints and cheap restaurants huddled like disreputable dwarfs under the shadow of the Company warehouses. North turned in at his own lodging house and tiredly climbed the dark stairs to the dusty garret which he and his comrades had shared for six months.

North found some of the others already there. Old Peters was there, of course, sitting in his makeshift wheel chair and peering across the huddled roofs at the thunderous take-off of the Venus liner. He turned his white head.

"That you, Johnny?" he shrilled, his faded eyes peering. "I was just watchin' that liner blast off. Sloppiest take-off I ever saw!"

The old man quavered on. "Cursed if these young space-men don't get worse every day. You ought to have seen the landin' the Mars mail-boat

made this mornin'. Why, when I was rocketin', anyone who made a landin' like that would have been kicked off the spaceport."

North assented absently. He was used to old Peters. The old man had not been in a ship for fifteen years, but still never tired of dwelling interminably on the old days.

"We wouldn't have stood for such spacemanship," he grumbled on.

North turned. Steenie was coming up to him. Steenie was forty three, but he had the smooth face and bright blue eyes of a boy of fourteen.

"Do we take off again tomorrow, John?" he asked North eagerly.

"Not tomorrow, Steenie," North answered gently. "Maybe the next day."

And Steenie went back to his chair in the corner and sat smiling vacantly at them. He had smiled that way for years, ever since he had come home from Wenzi's last voyage, a space-struck mental wreck.

JAN DORAK came up to North. A dark, heavy, stolid ex-spaceman, he looked inquiringly at North's drawn face.

"Any luck, Johnny? The new Company manager—"

"Is like all the rest," North answered wearily. "I'm too old."

The others were drifting in—Hansen and Connor and big Whitey Jones. They had heard his words.

"Never mind, they'll have to call us in someday soon," muttered stocky Lars Hansen confidently. "They'll find out they need us oldtimers."

"And anyway, I got a little job today and we'll eat tonight," declared Mike Connor. "Look, fellows — grub and synthebeer for everybody."

Connor's battered, merry red face was carefree as always as he showed his packages. Connor never had worried about anything, not even as Carew's third officer on that disaster-ridden second voyage long ago.

But big Whitey Jones, a shock-headed blond giant of forty, slapped North's back sympathetically with his left arm. Whitey's right sleeve hung empty and had hung that way since a tube-explosion years ago on Wenzi's ship.

"Too damned bad about the new operations manager, Johnny," he rumbled. "I was hoping he'd give you a break."

"Company rules don't change, it seems," North muttered. "A man over twenty-five hasn't a chance to be signed on."

"Hell take the Company!" growled Whitey. "As if you weren't a better space-man than the half-baked kids they've got running their tubs."

North made no answer. What was the use of going over all that again? The others were blind to the changes that had taken place. They still thought of themselves as the pioneering young space-men who had sailed with Johnson and Carew and Wenzi and the other great first explorers who had opened up the spaceways in their epochal first voyages to other planets.

But all that had been a generation ago. Everything had changed, since then. Interplanetary navigation had mushroomed from that precarious beginning into a vast, profitable trade. The rush of ambitious Earthmen to other worlds, the scramble for valuable metals and minerals on foreign planets, had caused space-shipping to expand with incredible rapidity.

And in that explosive expansion the early space pioneers had been forgotten. They had been famous for a short while—but fame was ephemeral in these swift-moving times. And very many of them had died from the hard-

ships of the early voyages in unsafe, ill-equipped, primitive ships. The great Gorham Johnson, the first space-voyager of all, had died in his third voyage off Jupiter. Mark Carew, his famous successor, had gone two voyages later. Wenzi hadn't long survived his pioneering trip to Pluto. From ray-burns or internal injuries or weakened hearts, the space pioneers had dwindled away.

And those who survived were nearly all in straitened circumstances. That had been more or less inevitable. They had been space-men, their only interest the pioneering of space travel. They therefore reaped no riches from the worlds they opened up. It had been the prospectors, and speculators and promoters who came after them, who eagerly staked claims to every valuable metal deposit on the planets, who reaped the reward. And the richest reward of all went finally to the astute Earth financiers who formed the giant Interplanetary Metals and Minerals Company, which bought or otherwise absorbed its smaller competitors until it dominated all interplanetary shipping and sucked profits from mines on every world.

Aging, poverty-stricken, deemed unfit now for the space-sailing that was their only trade, this dwindling remnant of the space pioneers had clung together. By pooling their scanty earnings at odd jobs, they had kept alive and hoped for a chance to get to space again. But now the last hope of John North and his comrades seemed definitely ended.

"It's a damned shame, for the Company to keep you earthbound," Whitey Jones repeated. "Just because you're a few years older than a boy."

"They'll be asking us to come back some day," affirmed Hansen dogmatically. "They'll find they can't do without the oldtimers."

"What's keeping that crazy Connor?" demanded old Peters querulously in his shrill voice. "I'm hungry and I want my supper."

"Keep your shirt on, you old rascal," came Connor's blithe voice. The battered ex-officer was putting cracked dishes on the table. "Come on!"

They ate hungrily in silence, and then opened the synthetic beer. A faint glow lighted the shabby company as they sat over the glasses, and talked the latest space-gossip, of ships reported missing, of a record run from Mercury, of the Company's latest financial piracy on Jupiter.

THE talk shifted inevitably back to the old days, as it always did. "I remember when—" "Say, do you remember that time when—" Old names of a generation ago passed freely back and forth. Old Peters crushed down all opposition to his shrill, authoritative pronouncements.

John North listened tonight with a sense of gray futility. He knew that they were all just trying to convince themselves that they were still of importance, trying somehow to recapture a little of that lost glory of the past, of youth. But tonight he could not fall in with it.

Whitey turned from a hot argument with Connor to ask him, "Johnny, this crazy Irishman says that Carew could have made Pluto if he'd pushed on in that third voyage. I say he's cuckoo. What do you think?"

North answered bitterly. "I think we're all ghosts, arguing over shadows."

They stared at him amazedly. But the bitterness that North had felt all afternoon was now breaking its bounds.

"What good does all this talk about the past do us? What difference does it make what we did twenty years ago? The world's forgotten all that. And

we'd better forget it. We'd better forget all about space-sailing, and try something else!"

Whitey answered bewilderedly. "But we don't know anything else but space-sailing."

"We can be gardeners, laborers, anything," North flared, getting to his feet. "It'd be better than always living in a forgotten past."

Then he felt swift contrition as he saw Peters' blinking stare, the faint distress in Steenie's vacant eyes, the heartsickness in the faces of Whitey and the others.

"I'm sorry, boys," North muttered, turning away. "Just blew my tubes, I guess. I'm going out for a breath of fresh air."

He flung open the door, then stopped short. Outside the door stood a girl in a smart white synthesilk dress, who had just been about to knock on their door.

She uttered a little breathless exclamation of surprise. "You startled me—"

North eyed her. She was young, tall but with a faint awkwardness of immaturity that somehow had a charm. He got an impression of dark hair, candid brown eyes and parted red lips.

"Is this where these men live?" she asked him earnestly, taking a pad out and reading a list of names. "Michael Connor, John North—"

"Yes, this is our residence," North replied ironically. "To just what do we owe the honor of this visit?"

He thought he understood, now. This girl was another of the social workers who from time to time had tried to get their little group to accept government charity.

Charity, to they who had blazed the trail of empire across a billion miles of space, to they who had opened up worlds!

CHAPTER 2

Uranian Treasure

THE girl seemed to sense the hostility behind North's tight face, for a certain embarrassment showed in her manner.

"My name is Aline Laurel," she said hesitantly.

"And I'm John North," he said flatly. "Just what do you want with us? I'm going out."

Connor, always inextinguishably gallant, came forward to reprove him. "For shame, Johnny, is that the welcome to give the most gracious vision that's ever brightened this dusty hole?" The Irishman made a grandiloquent gesture. "Step inside, miss, and pay no heed to this fellow."

Aline Laurel came in hesitantly. That faint awkwardness of her willow-tall figure made her seem younger than North had first thought.

He saw the look of distress in her eyes as she glanced around the dusty garret and then at the shabby, aging men who had risen from the table. Then she looked more closely at Connor's froglike red face.

"You would be Mike Connor, wouldn't you?" she asked eagerly. "I thought so! Years ago, I heard my father talk of you."

Connor scratched his bald head puzzledly. "Your father, miss?"

"His name was Thorn Laurel," she said. "Do you remember him?"

"Why, of course!" Connor exclaimed. "He was Carew's chief navigator, back on the old *Space Dream*."

"That's right, I remember him," Whitey Jones nodded. "A big, quiet fellow. Let's see, didn't he get killed out around Uranus in '99?"

Aline nodded gravely. "Yes. I was a little girl then."

"Thorn Laurel's daughter!" exclaimed Connor. "Why, say, that makes you one of us! Hansen, get a chair and dust it off."

North saw that his comrades were eagerly warming to the girl. And his own first hostility had faded away.

"I'm sorry for my rudeness," he told her. "I thought—"

"You thought I was an outsider," Aline said, smiling gravely.

Connor named off the other men, one by one, and they nodded almost shyly to the girl who seemed so out of place in this shabby company.

"You're forgettin' me!" came Peters' shrill, outraged protest.

Connor grinned. "The old rascal in the wheel-chair is all that's left of Jason Peters, Johnson's head cyc-man."

"Johnson? Gorham Johnson?" echoed the girl incredulously. "You sailed with *him?*"

"That I did, young lady," shrilled the oldster proudly. "Ain't nobody else on Earth can say that, now. I'm the last of 'em all."

Aline's eyes were shining. "Why, I know almost all you men, by name. You—you're history!"

North shrugged. "We're ancient history, to the rest of the world."

"I remember now about your father," Whitey Jones was saying in his deep voice to the girl. "He died out there at Uranus from injuries he got trying to find the levium deposit on the moon Oberon."

"Aye, I remember now too," Connor agreed. "He was only one of a lot of fine men that lost their lives over that lying myth of levium treasure on Thunder Moon."

"That levium wasn't a myth," Aline said earnestly. "My father found it."

They stared at her amazedly. North voiced their incredulity.

"But the System would have rung with it, if he had! A deposit of levium such as the stories told of would be worth a billion! You mean to say your father brought it back secretly—"

Aline shook her dark head. "No, father didn't bring back the levium from Oberon. He barely got back himself, in dying condition. But he did locate that levium deposit there. I know that."

SHE delved into her bag and brought out a scrap of time-yellowed paper that she carefully unfolded.

"My father wrote this when he lay dying," she said. "He gave it to my mother. She kept it all these years, until she died recently."

North read aloud the few scrawled lines of jerky writing.

"Levium deposit in west one of three crater-peaks rising from Flaming Ocean. Landing possible only on basalt plateau near spear-shaped bay on south coast. Use double anti-heat equipment. Cross to peaks in stone raft. Look out for Fieries."

"What did he mean by the Fieries?" Connor asked, scratching his head.

"There's stories of life on that volcanic moon," said Whitey. "Weird living creatures that can stand the terrific heat. He may have meant them."

North said dubiously, "The whole thing's not very clear, Your father may have been delirious. The few men who ever came back from Thunder Moon were all half-mad from their experience in the hellish place."

"Yes," muttered Hansen. "That's why that devil's satellite is still almost unexplored. Anyway, nobody believes in the story of levium there now."

"My father had this in his pocket when he came back," Aline Laurel said gravely, taking something from her bag.

It was a little lead glass vial. In

it was a tiny grain of mineral that glowed with a frosty, alluring blue brilliance. The shining grain did not lie in the bottom of the vial but at its *top*, pressing upward against the cork.

"Levium!" gasped Connor. "The queerest, scarcest mineral in the universe! Why, that tiny grain alone must be worth a hundred dollars!"

They all stared with intense interest. They had all heard of levium, though few of them had ever seen any. Only a few grains of it had ever been found. It was indeed the rarest, strangest and most elusive substance in the universe.

Levium was an element whose gravitational polarity was *reversed*. It repelled other matter, instead of attracting it. A piece of levium that was dropped would not fall to the ground—it would fly up into space.

It was supposed that the element had had its origin long ago in the deep interior of the Sun, the titanic electric charge of the outer solar orb operating to reverse the normal charges of the sub-electronic particles of this element, thus reversing its gravitational polarity. The convulsion of the Sun that long ago had formed the planets had spewed forth small masses of levium along with the other erupted elements.

Most of the planetary levium, of course, had vanished. It could not exist a moment on the surface of any world, since it would simply fly off into the void. But a few grains of it had been found trapped inside planetary crusts, and there had been persistent rumors of bigger deposits.

"There was more of it in the vial than this grain," Aline told them. "I sold the rest recently to get funds for my expedition."

"Your expedition?" North echoed. "You're not thinking of sending a party to Thunder Moon to hunt for that levium deposit?"

"I'm going *with* a party to Oberon to get it," she corrected him. "That's why I hunted out all you men, my father's old comrades. I want you to go with me after the levium."

The proposal was so startling that John North was stunned to silence for a moment. But Connor uttered a gleeful shout.

"Glory be, a chance for us to get to space again! Miss, you've brought us the best news we ever had."

The others' faces showed their excitement. "Didn't I keep telling you we'd be needed again some day?" Hansen cried exultantly.

"But I don't understand why you would want a lot of old-timers like us for such a venture," big Whitey was saying puzzledly to the girl.

"Because you *are* old-timers," Aline Laurel answered earnestly, "I know you're the finest space-men that ever were, you pioneers whom the world has forgotten. And I felt you'd join me in this because it would be a chance to help all the other forgotten space pioneers, the scattered ones who are sick and crippled and penniless, and can't help themselves any more."

SHE continued in eager explanation. "That levium deposit would be worth millions if we could get it. We'd all share in it as partners, but also I planned to use a share of the money to help all the sick, helpless, old-time space-men who are left. I know that's what my father would want."

John North felt a lump in his throat. He knew what such help would mean to his disabled, scattered former comrades.

"You're rather fine, Miss Laurel," he told her with deep feeling. "I wish to Heaven we could realize your dream. But—I'm afraid such an expedition is impossible. If you knew more about Oberon, you'd realize it!"

"That's right," muttered Whitey Jones, his excitement ebbing. "The terrific volcanic heat and awful lava flows of that moon have killed everyone who tried to explore. Even the big expeditions the Company sent to survey it never returned."

"But my father left directions how to combat the dangers there," reminded Aline. "His direction to make a landing only at one spot—he must have meant that by doing so, it would be possible to land safely on Oberon."

"That's rather a slim assurance to go on," North said thoughtfully. "I can't believe any landing-place on Oberon would be safe. Yet he must have learned something, as you say. It might just be feasible to land there so—"

"Of course it is!" declared the ebullient Connor, his red face glistening excitedly. "Hell, here's a chance for us to get to space again. Are we going to turn it down?"

North shrugged. "There's more to it than that. We haven't any ship, and no money to buy one. That's why I say it's impossible."

"But I already have a ship!" Aline said eagerly. "I used the money I got from selling the bit of levium to buy an old twelve-man cruiser from the Company. They're to give me title to it this afternoon."

She added more doubtfully, "It's a pretty old ship, I'm afraid. It was in the Company's Saturn run until they condemned it. But it was the only craft I could find at that price that would be able to go as far as Uranus."

"If it's got two plates that'll hold together, we'll nurse it out to Uranus and back!" boasted Connor. "We're none of your new style 'scientific' space-men—not we, that sailed in the crazy old first rocket-ships."

John North felt the enthusiasm of the others kindling him. He glimpsed a heaven-sent opportunity to see space once more—and to win a rich prize that would mean direly needed help for his old, broken, forgotten comrades.

"Whitey and I will go with you and look over the ship," he told Aline eagerly. "But what about equipment? What about the double outfit of anti-heaters your father mentioned?"

"We could get that stuff better out at Uranus itself, at Moontown on Titania," pointed out Whitey. "They use them a lot out there."

Aline's face fell. "But that will take money. And I'm afraid I haven't enough left."

"Never you mind, we'll worry about that when we get out there," Connor blithely reassured her. "We'll get that stuff if we have to steal it. Ah, it's going to be like old times again, roaring out the old space trail with the cycs singing a tune to us all the way."

"We go day after tomorrow, don't we, Johnny?" Steenie asked North with his bright smile. "You said we go back to space then."

"Sure we do, Steenie," North said gently. "Day after tomorrow."

"I'll get my kit ready," Steenie said eagerly, shuffling away to a corner. "I'll be all ready."

"Poor, space-struck feller," muttered old Peters. "He thinks we're goin' to take him with us."

Whitey stared at the old man. "You don't think you're going?"

"I'd like to know why not!" flared Peters. His faded eyes snapped. "I was rocketin' when you were wet-nosed infants, and don't you ever forget it! I'd like to see you leave *me* behind—"

North and Whitey went down the stairs with Aline Laurel. "The woman who runs this place will take care of Peters and Steenie while we're gone," he told her. "But we'll have to be dip-

lomatic with them."

"They—they make me want to cry," she said in a low voice.

TWILIGHT was descending on the huddled, raucous life of Killiston Street as the two men and the girl made their way toward the spaceport. The dusk was deeper by the time they reached the shipyard where the Company kept its surplus stores and equipment and condemned ships.

It was surrounded by a high fence, an extensive establishment of metal supply houses, looming storage tanks of fuel, oxygen and water, and orderly stacks of rocket-tubes, cyc-parts and hull plates. A brawny watchman at the gate who wore the Company gray recognized Aline and let them enter.

She led the way to a corner dock from which towered the tarnished torpedo-like metal bulk of a twelve-man long distance cruiser. It had dents of meteors in its hull plates. The projecting rocket-tubes looked worn and shaky. It bore the name *Meteor* on its bows.

They went inside and Aline watched anxiously while Whitey and North inspected the equipment with practised eyes. They started up the tarnished cyclotrons and listened closely to their throbbing drone, checking the controls by tramping hard on the cyc-pedal in front of the pilot chair. The old ship quivered violently in its dock to the vibration.

"Well, frankly, this craft has seen plenty of service and its Number Three and Number Five cycs aren't so hot," Whitey told Aline as they emerged from the ship. "But she ought to get us to Uranus all right."

North nodded agreement. "But we'll have to avoid running close to anything in space. Those controls are none too responsive."

Aline sighed in relief. "I'm glad the ship will do." Then she pointed across the yard. "There comes Mr. Carson, from whom I bought her."

Two men in the gray uniform of the Company were approaching. Carson was a stocky, middle-aged man, but his companion was a pleasant-faced, clean-cut younger fellow with the stars of an official on his collar. North and Whitey both stiffened with dislike of the Company uniform.

"My friends like the *Meteor,* Mr. Carson," Aline said eagerly. "We'll be able to take off soon."

Carson shook his head. "Well, now, Miss Laurel, I'm afraid we'll have to call off our deal. It seems I can't sell you the *Meteor,* after all!"

"But I gave you my check for it!" Aline cried in blank surprise.

Carson handed her a slip of paper. "Here it is back, Miss Laurel. Mr. Philip Sidney, this gentleman here, will explain it all to you."

Philip Sidney, the younger Company official, had an expression of discomfort on his clean-cut face as he stepped forward.

"It's orders from the Main Office, Miss Laurel," he told the girl. "The General Manager says we can't sell you any ship. But we'll be glad to provide a new craft and crew for your expedition, if you'll make arrangement to share with the Company any mineral levium you may find."

North asked the girl sharply, "Did you tell the Company why you wanted a ship, what you were going after?"

She shook her head bewilderedly. "No, I didn't. I can't understand —"

Philip Sidney shrugged. "We know you're going after levium, Miss Laurel. The Company has never credited the stories that a big deposit of it exists on Oberon, nor the rumors that your father once found it. But a few weeks ago, you sold a small quantity of levium to

a certain firm. We learned of that at once, of course. It didn't take much figuring to deduce that your father *had* located the stuff, and that you were going after it now."

"And so your precious Company decided at once to cut in on it?" John North snapped. "Is that it?"

"Yes, what's the Company's idea of the proper 'arrangement' that Miss Laurel must make with you, to get a ship?" Whitey Jones demanded.

Philip Sidney flushed. "It's the Main Office's orders, and I'm only obeying them in this. If Miss Laurel will concede the Company an eighty percent share of all precious minerals found, we'll provide her with a ship and crew."

"Eighty percent?" cried Aline Laurel unbelievingly. "Why, that's outrageous. I won't do it."

Sidney shrugged a little uncomfortably. "Then I'm afraid you'll never get a ship. Only the Company has any to sell, you know."

WHITEY JONES, his massive face dark with rage, balled his fist and stepped forward. "Why, you dirty rat—"

"Hold it, Whitey," North interrupted. "This fellow is just taking orders, as he says. It'll do no good to take it out on him. You just can't buck the Company, and that's all there is to it."

North turned heavily to Aline. "You'd better think over their proposition. It's robbery, of course—but you'd still make a fortune and otherwise you'll never get anything."

Though he kept his face and voice calm, North felt dead inside. His brief, wild hope of getting back to space, of helping his old comrades, of recapturing lost youth once more, had passed like a tantalizing dream.

"That's right, Miss Laurel," Philip Sidney was saying earnestly. "Twenty percent is a lot better than nothing. You ought to consider it."

"I'll never agree to such a thing," Aline Laurel retorted defiantly. "My father's friends are my partners, and I'm not going back on them!" She turned angrily away.

But she and North and Whitey were downheartedly silent as they walked slowly back to the drab lodging-house. Dusk had become night and the blue electrolites were coming softly on in Killiston Avenue. Already there were crowds in the tawdry pleasure-houses that lay in wait to fleece the crews of docked space-ships. From the spaceport came the dull *blam-blam* of a landing ship.

North broke the heavy silence that had lain between them as they walked along the crowded, noisy street.

"We're grateful for your loyalty to us," he told the girl. "But there's no need of it. Sidney was giving you good advice."

Aline's eyes flashed. "He's despicable! Going back on the deal after they'd sold me the ship—"

"Oh, he's just obeying orders and didn't seem to like it any too well himself," North told her. "He's right—twenty percent beats nothing."

"Sure, there's no use losing a fortune for yourself just to help us guys," Whitey rumbled. His massive face fell a little as he added, "But it's going to be a little tough telling the others."

Connor and the others in the dusty garret sprang up eagerly as the three entered.

"Did you see the ship, Johnny?" asked the Irishman excitedly. "Will she make the span to Uranus all right?"

"How about the fuel?" Hansen asked earnestly. "How soon can we start?"

North felt a little heartsick as he told

them what had happened, and saw the crushed, beaten look that came back onto their aging faces.

"Never you mind, Miss," Connor told Aline gallantly. "It was a fine thing you tried to do for us. But we can always take care of ourselves."

"I want you to listen to me," the girl told them emphatically. "In the first place, my name is Aline, and not Miss. In the second place, I'm not accepting any such offer as the Company is making."

"But you can't sacrifice your own interests to help us," North expostulated. "It would be foolish—"

"Not so foolish as it would be to go into partnership with the Company," she declared. "You know the high-handed way they do business, as well as I. Do you think that once they learned all I could tell, got my father's notes and secured the levium, they'd really give me a share of it?"

"By Heaven, she's right!" swore Connor. "Those slick pirates who run the Company wouldn't balk a minute at cheating her out of her share. It'd be the least of the misdeeds they've done."

NORTH felt troubled. He knew the it was the truth. The Company's remorseless and unscrupulous methods were proverbial. Its Main Office was interested only in squeezing every imaginable profit from every transaction.

"It's true they'd be tricky to deal with," he told Aline slowly, frowning. "But what else can you do, unless you give it up completely?"

"I'm not going to give it up," she declared firmly. "We're going to Oberon after that levium, as we planned. And we're going in my ship. They sold me the *Meteor* and it's mine and I'm going to use it."

Whitey shook his massive head. "They'll never let you have it or any other ship. They'll hold the case up in space-court for years if you sue them about it."

"We won't go to court," Aline retorted. "We'll simply take our ship, leave the check for them, and be on our way."

"But they'd charge you were guilty of piracy," North protested. "They'd—"

And then North stopped. He looked around at the others, and saw in every face the same excited, sudden determination that he too felt.

"They'd charge piracy," he muttered, "but we'd already be gone. If we could do it, if we could get away—"

Whitey's face was flaming. "Hell, why can't we? What do all these modern pettifogging space-laws mean to us? The ship is rightfully Aline's, law or no law. And if we can use it to lift that levium and give our old comrades a new lease on life—I say, let's take it!"

"Now you're talking!" crowed Connor, red face glistening. "We'll charge in there, grab the craft, and be away before they know what's happened! Come on, let's do it now!"

"Not so fast, you wild monkey," growled Jan Dorak. His stolid face turned inquiringly to North. "What about fuel and equipment, Johnny?"

North planned breathlessly. "We'd have to pull this at night. It would be a matter of overpowering the watchmen and then fueling up the ship before the alarm gets out. All of that anti-heater equipment we'd have to pick up out at Uranus, on Titania moon —if we got there."

He added warningly, "But the Company will raise a storm all over the System to stop us. They've got stations almost everywhere, too."

"Ha, I'd like to see some of these young pretty-boys they call space-men

stop *us,*" grunted Hansen. His blue eyes had a frosty light.

It was as though a new breath of life had been pumped into these aging men around North. They were adventurers all. And now, after gray years of Earthbound monotony, they were hearing adventure's siren call again.

CHAPTER 3

Spaceward Ho

"CAN we do it tonight?" stolid Jan Dorak asked calmly.

"There's fuel and supplies to be considered," North muttered. "We could get fuel, oxygen and water for the bunkers there in the Company yard, if we could keep the electrolarms quiet. But food—"

"I can buy what supplies you need and get them to the yard there tonight!" Aline offered eagerly.

"Hell, let's go tonight then!" burst out big Whitey. "Why shouldn't we when there's only a couple of watchmen between us and the space-trail to fortune! Just give us your orders, Johnny."

"*My* orders?" North echoed amazedly. "What the devil, I'm not captain of this party. I'm still the cub, the youngest man in the outfit."

"That's just why you've got to be first officer," Whitey rumbled decisively. "You're the quickest, youngest pilot in the lot. My one arm lets me out, Connor is a cyc-man and Hansen a navigator and you know how bad Dorak's eyes are. You're our best bet, and you know it."

The others chorused agreement. North frowned. "All right, but I'm damned if I won't feel out of place giving orders to you fellows. And this captain business only goes for the time being."

He talked rapidly. "Dorak, you go with Aline and bring a truck of space-rations to that Company yard at exactly eleven tonight. Hansen, start plotting our preliminary course in a C-curve toward Uranus. Connor, slip down to that yard and keep an eye on things inside. Whitey and I will be there at ten sharp."

As the others departed hastily, old Peters wheeled forward and asked an anxious question.

"You ain't forgettin' me and Steenie, Johnny? You wouldn't really leave us here, would you?"

"We've got to," North told him earnestly. "You know yourself that you're too old for a space-jaunt, Peters. The shock of starting would kill you."

The old man took it better than North had expected. "Well, maybe you're right," he mumbled. "Though I did want to see space again once more before I died."

"Aren't we going to sail with you, Johnny?" asked Steenie, a bewildered look in his vacant eyes. "Aren't you going to take us?"

"We can't, Steenie," North said gently. "Someone has to stay and look after Peters, don't you see? We want you to do that."

"But you'll need me, for I'm a good pilot," Steenie said seriously. "They said I was the best pilot that ever took a space-ship out, didn't they, Whitey?"

Whitey, his massive face moved, nodded pityingly. "Yes, they said that, Steenie, and it was true. You were the greatest pilot of them all, back in those times."

"Sure, and we'll want you the next voyage," North told the space-struck man. "But this time I want you to stay. It's an order, Steenie."

Out of a dim, half-forgotten past, Steenie brought a sharp gesture of salute. "Yes, sir! I'll obey orders."

He and the old man in the wheelchair watched for the next few hours as North and Whitey feverishly helped Hansen plot the course they would have to follow to take the most feasible path toward Uranus, and pack their few spare space-jackets in compact kits.

Connor came hastening back into the room, his frog face crimson now with excitement.

"Just two watchmen down at that Company yard," he reported. "One at the front gate and one at the side."

"We can handle them," North declared. He glanced at his watch. "Time to go!"

They looked uncertainly across the dimlit garret at old Peters, slumped in his chair with Steenie standing beside him.

"Ah, don't stop to blather goodbyes," grunted the old veteran. "You're just wasting time."

SILENTLY, North and the other three trooped down the dark stairs to the street. Shouldering their kits, they moved quietly along the bright, tawdry, noisy thoroughfare toward the spaceport whose red and green towerlights hung against the starry sky.

Rocket-flame curved skyward with a thunderous roar as a freighter climbed from its dock. North felt a thrill. It had been almost two years since he'd been to space. He felt tonight as though he was seventeen again, swaggering proudly with a younger Whitey toward Carew's crazy little ship that was to take them into the unknown.

They went more slowly as they approached the front gate of the Company's space-stores yard. North stopped in the shadow of a tower.

"We've got to get that gate open," North muttered. "Wait here."

He strode forward into the pool of light outside the gate, and urgently pushed the stud that rang a bell in the watchman's hut.

The watchman, a short, thickset man in the Company gray, came out and scrutinized him keenly through the bars of the gate.

"Mr. Sidney sent me over to get a report he left here today," North said nonchalantly. "Open up there, will you."

The watchman hesitated. "You're not in uniform," he remarked.

"I'm not one of your Company slaves," North retorted cheerfully. "I'm Sidney's buddy. Hurry up, man —I don't have all night."

A little doubtfully, the man unlocked the gate. "Let's see now, where's the ship *Meteor?*" North asked. "He left it in there, he said."

The watchman turned to point. "It's over—"

Thunk! The man went down like a bundle of rags as North's fist caught the angle of his jaw. North whistled a low note. Connor and Whitey and Hansen came in like swift shadows.

They bound and gagged the watchman efficiently, and then crept silently toward the side gate. The second watchman was soon tied up also.

"Watch by the main gate, Whitey," North ordered. "Hansen, here's the watchman's electrolarm key. I imagine the things have to be punched on the hour. Go around and try to find every one of them."

Then he gestured Connor. "Now for the fuel and oxygen. Come on!"

He and Connor raced toward the *Meteor*. The Irish cyc-man was chuckling under his breath as they ran between the looming supply-houses.

"Ah, it's like the old days come to life again, Johnny! I remember a night when—"

North had reached the *Meteor* and was using the watchman's torch to

search for the fuel, oxygen and water lines. They must be somewhere near the dock, he knew — and at last he found the three heavy metal pipe-lines, that stemmed from towering tanks across the dark yard.

He and Connor scrabbled around until they made fast the flexible pipe-connections to the inlets in the side of the ship's hull.

"Go over to that fuel-house and start the stuff pumping," North panted to his companion. "I'll watch the gauges and give you a two-flash signal when the bunkers are full."

Connor raced away. North soon heard a low throbbing of pumps over in the fuel-house. And a few seconds later there was a whispering rustling from inside the pipes they had connected to the *Meteor's* inlets.

Powdered copper was being pumped through one of those pipes into the big fuel bunkers of the ship, to serve to feed the cyclotrons. Oxygen for the 'genator tanks was being forced under compression through a second pipe, and drinking water through a third.

North alertly watched the gauges inside the cramped control-room, hunching in the pilot chair and using the torch for light. Hansen's head protruded suddenly into the crowded, shadowy little room.

"I think I got all the electrolarms," he reported tensely. "I was all over every corner of the yard."

"Okay, slide back out to the main gate to Whitey," North rapped to him. "I think Aline and Dorak just arrived with the rations."

THE gauges finally showed that the bunkers of the *Meteor* were full. North hastily flashed a signal, and the throbbing of pumps stopped. North was disconnecting the feed-lines when Connor came hurrying up.

Behind the Irishman materialized a small power-truck, running without lights. Aline and Dorak hastily climbed down from its cab, while Whitey and Hansen appeared closely behind it.

Aline's face was a white blur in the darkness but her voice was thrilled as she reported to North. "I left my check for the ship on the watchman—and we have the rations here."

"Come on—let's get them in," sweated North. "Connor, get back to those cycs and start the injectors. We'll want to take off fast."

They were hauling the flat cases of concentrated foods into the dark ship, blundering and stumbling over each other in the narrow passageways inside, when there came a sharp warning whisper from Aline.

"I think somebody's coming!"

North jumped out into the darkness. He heard a sound of faintly creaking wheels and then a shrill voice cut through the night.

"Are we 'bout ready to go, Johnny?"

"Holy comets, it's old Peters!" gasped Whitey. "How the devil did he get here?"

That mystery was soon explained. Steenie wheeled the old cripple's chair forward toward the ship.

"Thought you was goin' to leave the old man behind, eh?" cackled Peters. "Not much! Soon's you were gone, I told Steenie to wheel me here."

"Am I going in that ship, Johnny?" Steenie asked eagerly.

North groaned. "You've got to go back, Peters. You and Steenie can't come—"

"I'll come or know the reason why!" shrilled the old man's quivering voice. "You ain't goin' to cheat me out of my last chance to go to space. I'll come, or else I'll yell my head off right now."

"We'll have to let them come, Johnny," groaned Whitey. "If we

don't, the old rascal will rouse the whole spaceport."

"All right, get them into the ship," North said helplessly. "Come on—we've got to get the rest of these rations aboard—"

Bong! Bong!

They jumped as somewhere in the darkness nearby a bell began a clamorous, frantic clanging.

"Oh, Lord, I must have missed one of the electrolarms!" cried Hansen. "That jams everything—"

Distant cries of alarm could be heard over the hellish clangor of the electrolarm bell. Whistles shrilled, and big searchlights on the spaceport towers blazed out blue-white beams that swept rapidly toward this shipyard.

"Into the ship! We've got to let the rest of the rations go!" North yelled. "There'll be Company police here in two minutes!"

Already sirens were whining in a rising crescendo. There was a distant roar of speeding rocket-cars dashing toward the shipyard.

Blue beams of the sweeping searchlight caught and held in a dazzling glare the space-men as they tumbled into the ship.

"Connor, start the cycs!" blared North's voice. "Hansen, the door! Everyone in their space-chairs!"

He leaped forward into the little control-room and snapped the panel switch. Light leaped out from hooded lamps and gleamed off the bank of dials and throttles, and the space-stick and pedals.

North's hands buckled himself into the pilot chair with frantic speed, while big Whitey scrambled into the co-pilot seat beside him. The slam of the hermetic door was followed by a bursting, throbbing roar that shook the old ship in every strut. Connor had the cycs going.

NORTH'S hands closed tightly on the space-stick, centering it precisely for a keel-tube take-off.

"Blasting off!" he yelled back through the ship.

Through the window, he glimpsed a half dozen rocket-cars rushing across the shipyard toward them. Men jumped from the cars, levelling heavy atom-guns and shouting inaudible commands.

North was suddenly icy calm. The discipline of twenty years experience took possession of his body. Holding the space-stick precisely centered, his foot jammed the cyc-pedal to the floor.

Recoil springs screamed torturedly under his chair as the acceleration from point zero slammed down on him. Giant iron hands seemed to constrict his chest, preventing him from breathing, strangling him. His head roared and a red blur dimmed his vision.

But he glimpsed lights and docks and shouting men outside vanish as though by magic, as the raving energy of the cycs poured in a scorching blast from the keel tubes. The starred heavens overheard were rocking dizzily to the wild lurching of the upshooting *Meteor*.

North jerked the space-stick back a little, keeping the cyc-pedal floorboarded. The atomic energy of the cycs, now partly diverted to the tail tubes, sent the old cruiser upward in a steep, swinging climb.

"Thought her thrust-struts were going to give!" he heard Whitey shouting thinly over the roar of cycs and tubes. "But they didn't—"

North made no answer, bending the space-stick farther and farther back. And the old *Meteor*, creaking, rocking and shuddering in every beam, climbed higher on a roaring slant into the star-decked heavens.

The spaceport lights were a red-green quadrangle of tiny size on the

black globe below. They were roaring up out of the shadow of Earth's curve into the brassy glare of the Sun, and the air-friction alarms were shrieking wildly as the hull overheated.

North's laugh pealed out over the throbbing roar. "Clean blast-off! We slipped them nicely, Whitey!"

His soul was throbbing tune with the cycs in wild intoxication. The feel of the space-stick in his hands was like wine to him, and the brilliant stars of space were like luring beacons, and the old *Meteor* a magic ship capable of driving to the farthest reaches of infinity.

Old ship and old space-men—both of them condemned and forgotten—going to space again! And now John North knew that he had not been really living in those dull, gray Earthbound months. He had only been sleeping, existing, waiting for this time when he could live again.

The flame of emotion on Whitey's massive face told him that his old comrade felt the same. They were out of atmosphere now, and the friction alarms had fallen silent, and Earth was a convex green globe dropping away behind and below them.

Reluctantly, North eased his pressure on the cyc-pedal. The bursting roar of the cycs dropped to a steady drone. Its tail tubes roaring, the old ship throbbed out toward the far green spark that was distant Uranus.

ALINE LAUREL came into the control-room, looking pale and shaken. North suddenly realized that it must be her first space voyage.

"You're sick?" he cried anxiously. "I might have known it -that start I had to make fast."

She shook her dark head. "No, I'm all right. But old Peters—he's hurt, John. The shock—"

Hastily, North called for Dorak to come forward and take the space-stick. He and Whitey hurried back along the shuddering catwalk to the bunkroom in which the old man was lying, the others bending over him.

One glance constricted North's heart. Peter's eyes were closed, his face blue, and a thin trickle of red was at the corner of his mouth.

"Unconscious, now," he murmured after examining the old man. "Internal injuries. I told him he couldn't stand the shock of starting."

Aline's pale face held a question. "Will he—"

"He can't live," North said heavily. "It's only a matter of hours."

The others were silent. But Steenie looked at him with a faint distress in his clear, vacant eyes.

"Is Peters sick, Johnny?" he asked puzzledly.

The hours went by, but the old veteran's condition did not change. They were now flying out well toward the orbit of Mars, and North set the watches and extended the flight-curve Hansen had computed.

"We'll swing wide of Jupiter to avoid the main space lanes," he told the others. "The Company will have police cruisers on the lookout for us, be sure of that. But they can't comb all space."

Whitey nodded soberly. "We can get to Uranus all right, if this craft keeps ticking. But if we have trouble off the space lanes—"

He didn't need to finish. The men all knew that a slow death by starvation or air-exhaustion would be their fate in such a case.

North looked intently at Uranus before he left the space-stick to Hansen. The green spark was brighter and bigger, now. Its moons were not yet visible to the unaided eye.

He felt a sense of unreality about this strange quest. Quest to dreaded Thunder Moon for the levium half the System thought fabulous! Quest amid strange perils with only a dead man's word to guide them —

"John, Peters is coming to!" Aline called him.

North hastened back to the bunkroom, with the others. The old veteran had opened his eyes. The faded blue eyes were dazed, bewildered, as they looked up at the anxious faces.

Then as old Peters looked beyond them, at the window with its vista of star-jeweled space, a queer expression of triumph, of happiness, lit his eyes. Almost contentedly, he closed them again.

"He's sleeping now," Aline said hopefully. "Maybe —"

North drew her gently away. He told Connor heavily, "You wrap him up, Mike. We'll give him space-burial."

In dead silence, the men moved toward their old companion as North led the girl to the main cabin. She looked up at him incredulously.

"He can't be dead!" she exclaimed.

"I've seen lots of men die in space, and they all go like that," North told her. "But old Peters went happy—he knew, before he died, that he was back in space again."

THEY brought the wrapped body out and gently placed it inside the airlock of the main door. Steenie stood, watching with his vacant blue eyes wide and puzzled. The others turned to North.

"Can you remember the space-burial ritual?" asked Whitey.

North shook his head. "Nothing but the opening words, '*Since this man our comrade—*' How about you, Whitey?"

Whitey shook his massive head somberly. "It's been so long since I heard it used, that I've forgotten it long ago."

North looked around at the other two But both Connor and Dorak shook their heads.

"Don't seem quite right to bury old Peters without saying the words, but I guess we'll have to do it," said Dorak sadly.

Then Steenie surprised them all. The space-struck sailor had been staring at the wrapped body in the airlock. As though it had brought something to his dimmed mind, he stepped forward and began to speak simply.

"*Since this man our comrade has reached life's end in perilous traverse between world and world, and may not lie in any world to await the judgment of eternity—*"

They were all rigidly silent, startled, wonder stricken, as Steenie's quiet voice rolled on, speaking the words that long ago Mark Carew had spoken for Gorham Johnson, his great chieftain—those classic words that had been used ever since for the ritual of space-burial.

"*—and therefore we commit this body to the great deeps of the infinite, to wander the vastnesses of the void until such day as the last summons shall call from space its dead.*"

Steenie's voice stopped. North and the others looked at him breathlessly, half-expecting that a miracle had restored his dimmed reason. But Steenie's face was as blank, his blue eyes as vacant, as ever.

"I remembered it all, didn't I?" he said proudly.

"Yes, Steenie," North said unsteadily. "You remembered it all."

He made a signal with his hand. Hansen, at the space-stick, gave the *Meteor* a sharp snap-turn with a blast of the lateral tubes.

The wrapped corpse of the old veteran was thrown clear from the airlock, and drifted rapidly off into space.

They all watched silently, until the dot was no longer visible against the stars.

"There goes the last of Gorham Johnson's crew," muttered Whitey.

"You know," said Jan Dorak thoughtfully, "it wasn't so far from here that Johnson himself was given space-burial. It'd be queer if old Peters would find his chief out there, wouldn't it?"

Aline had turned away. North followed her back to the stern cabin and found her there, face pressed against a window, sobbing.

"It was my fault it happened!" she choked, when he turned her tear-stained face around. "If I hadn't proposed this quest, he wouldn't have been killed—"

"Why, Aline, Peters died happy!" North told her. "It's what he wanted above everything else—to die in space, to be buried in space."

He soothed her. And she clung to him, burying her head on his shoulder.

But all North's wild exhilaration was gone. And as he looked out of the window at Uranus' largening green spark, he could not help feeling that it was into an ever-deepening shadow that they were flying on their desperate quest to Thunder Moon.*

* Uranus was the frontier of the Solar System, in this year 2018. It was true that men had gone beyond it to visit Neptune and even Pluto, but these had been mere exploring expeditions. It was at Uranus that the most distant outpost of the pioneering men of Earth had been planted.

The colony was not on the great planet itself. Prospectors and engineers and promoters made constant surveys on the huge world, but its sky-storming mountains, its hurricanes of demoniac violence and shattering rains, made it too wild for continued habitation. The new Earth colony was on Titania, one of the four moons.

From the raw and lawless new city of Moontown on that jungled satellite, hard-bitten adventurers sallied forth in perilous search for radium and platinum and other precious metals in the wilds of the great parent planet or on the other two moons of Ariel and Umbriel. The fourth satellite, the dreaded Thunder Moon, they strictly shunned.—Ed.

CHAPTER 4

In Moontown

JOHN NORTH had not been to Uranus for four years. It was with sharp emotion that he watched its great green sphere expand across the sky.

He spoke to the one-armed giant in the co-pilot chair beside him. "Do you remember, Whitey—coming in toward it with Carew for the first landing?"

Whitey Jones nodded with deep feeling. "And how excited we youngsters all were, eh? It doesn't seem twenty years ago."

North's mind forced away those old memories, to consider their present difficulties. Every day of the long, curving flight out through the System had increased his foreboding.

They were, strictly speaking, pirates. And though Earth law did not yet reach to this wild frontier of space, the power of the Company did. There was a Company station at Moontown. And to Moontown they must go, somehow to procure there the anti-heat equipment vital to their quest.

North raised his voice. "Aline! Mike! We'll have to start the brake-blasts soon. Better get ready to strap in."

The others came forward to the control-room. Connor's red face was carefree as ever. The long, monotonous days that had made Dorak more silent and Hansen more brooding had not affected the reckless Irishman.

But Aline Laurel was pale from the weeks of ship-air, her dark eyes very large in her white, fine face as she peered eagerly ahead.

"Uranus looks so huge from this close," she breathed. "And so frightening."

"It's plenty big and plenty bad," North admitted, eyeing the great plan-

et. "It's the stormiest of all the major worlds."

Uranus was a forbidding spectacle. Its mighty green sphere blotted out half the heavens, so close now was the *Meteor*. Yet little could be seen of its surface, wrapped as it was in cloudy atmosphere hundreds of miles deep. That cloudy blanket was boiling with black storms, that moved across the surface at hurricane speed.

Three of the great planet's moons were visible to them, from this sunward side. The two little satellites Ariel and Umbriel were close to the planet, creeping across its face. Farther out, and nearer to their approaching ship, marched the larger moon Titania. The dense, wild jungle with which it was clad lent it a deeper shade of green than the parent planet.

"It looks almost as wild as Uranus," murmured Aline doubtfully, gazing at this moon that was their immediate destination.

"It's not as bad, though the jungles are full of queer beasts and those outlandish Titanian aborigines," rumbled Whitey. He pointed to a dark spot on the green satellite. "That's Moontown, the rawest, wildest boom-town in the System."

"That's where we're going to try to get the anti-heat equipment?" asked the girl earnestly. "Are you sure we'll be able to get it there?"

North said grimly, "I'm sure they'll have it there, if that's what you mean. They use anti-heat equipment a lot for prospecting in the southern volcanic region of Uranus. But as to how we're going to get it, without money or credit—"

"Ah, quit worrying and leave that to me," Connor retorted cocksurely. "Didn't I tell you I'd get the stuff? I've got friends here."

They were turning to go back to the main cabin and strap in, when Whitey pointed his single arm and said in a quick, low voice:

"There's Oberon now, coming out of eclipse!"

THE fourth satellite of Uranus was coming out from behind the bulk of the planet. Aline cried out at sight of it.

The moon was a terrifying sight. It was a sullen crimson sphere, wrapped in a shallow atmosphere heavily laden with dark smoke. Through rifts in that gloomy, smoky haze could be glimpsed flaming volcanic continents—lands of fire upon whose burning coasts surged the evil crimson tide of a great ocean of molten lava.

Thunder Moon, lurid hell-world of the System, a playground of unchained volcanic forces that made it resemble some inferno of ancient superstition! Its red rays struck through the window of the flying ship, mingling with the softer planet-light to paint the tense faces of the staring group.

"Surely no amount of anti-heat equipment will make it safe to land *there!*" gasped Aline Laurel.

"It wouldn't, ordinarily," John North admitted. "But your father's directions indicate that he found a spot where it was just possible to land by using heavy anti-heat equipment. We'll have to gamble on that."

He added warningly, "Go back and strap in now. I've got to start cutting in toward Titania."

The *Meteor* came down toward Titania in a long, swinging sweep, North expertly using the lateral tubes to edge them into a closing spiral and the brake-blasts to slow their speed. Even so, by the time the old ship roared down through the atmosphere of the moon in a descending slant across the green jungle, Moontown was being overtaken by

approaching night.

The town lay in the dusk as a huddle of flimsy chromaloy shacks, situated at the center of a raw clearing blasted out of the jungle. A little north of it was a smaller clearing that held the spaceport. North brought the creaking old ship down toward the red and green beacons with practised smoothness. He kept it hovering a moment, riding the flaming jets of its keel tubes, and then let it sink to the ground.

"Good landing, Johnny," rumbled Whitey as they unstrapped. "You haven't lost the touch."

The others were getting out of their chairs, back in the main cabin. Hansen unscrewed the door, and a flood of warm, damp air heavy with pungent scents of decaying vegetation rushed in.

"Moon-shoes on, everybody," North warned, stooping to buckle on the auxiliary lead soles himself.

They stepped out into the gathering dusk, stepping onto churned-up soil still smoking from the rocket-blasts. Shapes of other ships, freighters and a couple of cruisers, loomed vaguely across the spaceport.

Queer creatures like travesties of men came running eagerly toward them. Aline Laurel shrank back with a little cry. These were green, manlike creatures, with enormous pupilless eyes in their parrot-beaked faces. They wore rags of cast-off Earth clothing, and extended fingerless hands.

"'Sal, Urmen!" they screeched to North. "'Sal!"

"They're just Titanian aborigines," North reassured the scared girl. "They're gebbing for salt—give the poor devils a little, Hansen."

Whitey gripped his arm, nodding his massive head toward one of the two gleaming cruisers on the other side of the spaceport.

"That's a fast Company cruiser, Johnny, and it just got in before we did. See, the ground's still hot from its landing-jets."

NORTH stiffened with alarm. "We might have expected it," he muttered. "The Company could send a cruiser out here from Earth and it'd get here before we did, by following the regular space-lanes."

"If they try to take the *Meteor* away from us, it'll be fight!" flared Whitey. "Earth law doesn't run past Jupiter. We hold our ship!"

The others muttered agreement. The hatred of these men for the Company that had so long barred them from employment flamed out quickly.

"Take it easy—it hasn't come to a fight yet," rapped North. "Maybe the Company's planning to let us go on to Thunder Moon, so they can follow us right to the levium there. Or they may figure that we'll have to come to them to get anti-heat equipment here."

"The company's not the only ones in Moontown who have anti-heaters," declared Hansen. "You can get them at the supply-houses that outfit prospectors for Uranus."

"You can, if you have money or credit," muttered Jan Dorak.

"I can get the credit, boys!" announced Mike Connor buoyantly. "I know a chap here who'll stake us for the equipment, for a share of the profits. It's Charles Berdeau, who runs a pleasure-house here."

"Berdeau?" rumbled Whitey. "I never heard any good of *that* interplanetary rascal. They ran him out of Jupiter."

John North shrugged. "We'll have to get help where we can. Mike and I will go into the town and look up this fellow. You and the others had better stay here, Whitey—in case the Company officers here do try to take the

Meteor."

"Can I go with you?" Aline Laurel asked North eagerly.

"I'd rather you stayed," he told her earnestly. "Moontown is a tough, wild place—no place for a girl. And there may be trouble there."

He sensed her disappointment as he and Connor buckled on atom-pistols and strode away through the deepening dusk.

It was almost completely dark by the time they crossed the spaceport and started along the short road through the jungle to the town. The damp air was heavy with rank scent of the dense forest of fern-like trees. Queer "floating flowers" drifted against their faces, leaving lingering traces of exquisite perfume. Far off in the jungle a tree-cat wauled blood-chillingly, while overhead in the darkness was the leathery rattle of a passing dragon-hawk's wings. Moon-bats called screechingly.

The stars blazed brightly down upon them. But over at the east horizon there was a ghostly uprush of green light from behind the horizon. It waxed stronger by the minute. Then the colossal green shield of Uranus pushed up into the sky, filling half the heavens as it poured down viridescent brilliance like an incredible huge, emerald moon.

Conner uttered an ebullient exclamation as they approached the lights of Moontown.

"Ah, this is living again, Johnny! And I was afraid we'd rust our lives out in that dustry garret on Earth."

North felt it too, that hot tingling as of long-dead youth come back again. It was good to be out here amid the far, wild worlds once more!

But he curbed his excitement, reminding himself of the desperate urgency of their mission here. "This Berdeau—where will we find him?"

"He'll be somewhere around, if they haven't hanged him yet," Connor said blithely. Then as they came to the edge of the town, the Irishman uttered an exclamation. "Holy comets, just look at that street!"

Moontown was blazing with life tonight, under the green glow of mighty Uranus. The heart of the boom city was a single short street, lined solidly with gambling halls, drinking joints and similarly dubious establishments. Behind this street, the warehouses and outfitting shops of the Company and independent traders were dark, but along this street there was a brilliant glow of "ion-signs" beckoning to pleasure.

DRUNKEN Earthmen reeled through the crowd in the muddy street, prospectors squandering in a short spree the radium or platinum they had risked their lives for on Uranus. Little groups of the parrot-beaked green Titanians pestered with their begging cry of " 'Sal, Urmen!", or peered wonderingly into the brilliant buildings whence came the throb and blare of brassy music.

North had seen planetary boom-towns before, and they were always much the same. Always they were haunted by a riff-raff of crooked gamblers and outlaws and star-girls, and cunning traders and promoters who garnered the wealth that hardy adventurers wrested from alien perils. But never, even on Jupiter in the old wild days, had he seen such a roaring tempo as ruled here beneath the green glow of great Uranus.

"A fellow could have a fight or a frolic here, Johnny!" Mike Connor was exclaiming, his frog face grinning.

"We're not here for fun," North rapped. "What about this Berdeau chap?"

"Talk of the devil and you see his sign!" Connor retorted. "See that,

Johnny?"

The ion-sign he pointed at was glowing from a false-fronted chromaloy hall further down the street—*"Berdeau's Pleasure Palace!"*

They paused when they reached its wide-open doors. The big, krypton-lighted room inside was a crowded bedlam—clatter of glasses along the bar, roaring voices of intoxicated men, brassy blare of a music-machine spouting a dance tune, all adding to the uproar.

Burly prospectors who still had the greenish pallor of weeks on Uranus upon their faces were clustered thickest around the bar and and the gambling machines in back. Mingling with them, coaxing them to squander their money more quickly, were hard-eyed "star-girls," as the System nicknamed the Earthgirl clipjoint hostesses who followed the boom towns from world to world.

North and Connor pushed to the bar, and the Irishman asked a question of the sweating, overworked bartender. Then he turned to North.

"Berdeau's somewhere in back. You wait here, Johnny, and I'll find him."

North ordered Martian wine and drank the thin, sweet stuff slowly, absently listening to the roaring boasts of the drunken Earthman by him.

"—an' that's how I made my strike on South Uranus, partner. I tell you, I can *smell* platinum! I got me a fortune to take back home—"

North smiled bitterly to himself. The drunken prospector, he thought, had about one chance in a million of ever getting his fortune back to Earth. The swindlers and crooks of Moontown would see to that.

Through the uproar of the place there cut a sharp feminine voice. "Let go of my wrist, you big lug!"

North turned. One of the star-girls in the throng, a small blonde girl in a scanty white synthesilk dress, was furiously trying to free herself from a flushed-faced, angry, rough Earthman radium miner.

"No you don't, sister!" the red-faced miner was bellowing. "You got me to spend all my money—now you're not going to walk out on me."

North turned cynically back to his drink. The sordid incident did not interest him. But in a moment he turned sharply around again.

He had heard Mike Connor's voice loudly raised. "Quit badgering the lady, you big ape!" Connor was telling the angry radium miner. "Can't you see she's had enough of you?"

"Who are you to give me orders?" bellowed the man to Connor.

North groaned. "That damned fool Irishman! Fighting over a star-girl—"

CONNOR had belligerently interposed himself between the star-girl and the infuriated, half-intoxicated miner. North started forward to drag the too-chivalrous Irishman away.

Then someone yelled warning. The furious miner had suddenly drawn the heavy atom-pistol at his belt and was levelling it at Connor and the girl. His rough face was livid with rage.

"I'll blast you both down!" he shouted hoarsely at Connor. "You're in with that crooked little—"

North could have flashed his own atom-gun but he didn't. Without hesitation, he dived for the raging miner's legs in a flying tackle that bowled the man off his feet.

The fellow's atom-pistol let go in a scorching blast past North's ear, as they grappled on the floor. Then North glimpsed an opening and smashed hard with his fist. It cracked upon the miner's jutting jaw and the man went limp.

North kicked the fallen atom-pistol

away and rose to his feet, breathing hard.

"Haul that space-tramp out of here!" shouted the bartender, and a waiter hurried to drag the senseless miner outside.

The uproar in Berdeau's Pleasure Palace, that had quieted for the few moments of the incident, resumed. A fight was nothing new here.

North had jerked Connor angrily off the central floor. "You big idiot!" he said scathingly to the Irishman. "Starting a row in here, when we're in trouble enough as it is."

"But I couldn't let that drunken bum push a lady around, Johnny," defended Connor.

"A lady? That star-girl?" repeated North witheringly. "Don't be ridiculous."

Someone touched his arm. North turned, and then his face darkened. It was the star-girl over whom the fight had started.

She was an almost childishly small figure, in her scanty, brazenly-revealing white synthesilk dress. Her blonde head came barely to North's shoulder. But there was nothing childish about her face, the pert prettiness of which was hardened by too much make-up and too-wise blue eyes.

"I'm Nova Smith," she told North. "And thanks a lot for jumping that crazy drunk."

"You needn't thank me—I don't go around fighting over star-girls," North retorted with dislike. "I was merely trying to save this fool Irishman from getting blasted."

The star-girl bristled. "Nice and friendly, aren't you? Did I ask either of you to mix in? I can take care of myself."

"You girls usually can," North answered contemptuously.

"Now, Johnny, that's no way to be talking to a pretty girl," Connor reproved gallantly. His frog face wrinkled at the girl in what he believed to be a winning smile. "He's just upset, Miss Nova—"

"You'll be upset by the toe of my foot if you don't get going and find this fellow Berdeau," John North warned him ominously. "And don't tell him too much—I'll put the deal up to him."

Connor hastened away through the noisy crowd. North turned moodily back to his half-finished goblet of Martian wine at the bar.

The star-girl followed him and stood appraising him with coolly insolent blue eyes. "Old-time space-sailor, aren't you?" she said. "Sure, I can tell you fellows a mile away."

"Look, I'm not buying you any drinks if that's what you're hanging around for," North told her brutally. "Clip someone else."

Nova Smith shrugged her bare shoulders. "All right, sailor. But here's a tip, in exchange for what you did. Watch yourself, if you're going into any deal with Berdeau. He's as crooked as they come."

"He's your boss, isn't he?" North said skeptically.

"No one is my boss, sailor!" flared the star-girl. "I work here in Berdeau's place drumming up trade, but he doesn't own me and nobody else does. So don't you talk as though—"

She stopped. John North wasn't listening. He had suddenly stiffened as he saw three men enter the noisy room and look around.

They were all in the Company's gray uniform, and all were armed. Their leader was Philip Sidney, the young Company officer with whom North and his friends had clashed on Earth.

Sidney's gaze fixed on North. At once, his pleasant young face became grim. He and his two companions

started purposefully toward North.

CHAPTER V

The Attack

NORTH'S hand dropped toward the atom-pistol at his belt. He felt taut inside, for he knew that a crisis was at hand.

He knew now that Philip Sidney had been sent here in that Company cruiser that had beaten them to Uranus. That showed the deep determination of the Company to possess the levium that he and his comrades were seeking.

"Trouble is coming," North rapped to the star-girl, without turning. "There may be a fight. Better get out of here."

Nova Smith looked from his face to the three approaching men. "So you're in trouble with the Company, sailor? What's the angle?"

North had no time to answer. Sidney stood confronting him. The two Company men behind him had their hands near their atom-pistols.

"I thought you'd be in one of these places," Sidney said accusingly to North. "We heard you just got in. And I'm demanding that you turn over the *Meteor* to its rightful owners, the Company."

"Aline Laurel is rightful owner of that ship," North retorted coolly. "She bought it and paid for it."

"That forced sale was illegal and you know it," said Sidney.

North shrugged. "Earth law doesn't run out here on the frontier. What are you going to do about it?"

He was ready for an explosion. But Philip Sidney made no move toward his weapon. The young Company officer's voice dropped earnestly.

"North, I have to obey my orders whether I like them or not. But I'll tell you this, man to man—you ought to be shot if you take a fine girl like Miss Laurel out there into the dangers of Thunder Moon!"

Sidney's clean-cut young face was flushed with anxiety. His sincerity was so apparent that North could not help feeling a certain liking for him. He had to remind himself harshly that he was talking to an officer of the hated Company.

"You're mighty worried about Miss Laurel," North jeered. "So worried that you'll be trailing right after us to Oberon, won't you?"

Philip Siidney shrugged helplessly. "I see you won't listen to reason, North. I'm sorry."

He turned away, the other two Company men following him out of Berdeau's establishment. North looked after them with narrowed eyes.

What orders had the Company given Sidney? He felt sure that they would be orders to follow North's expedition to Oberon and the levium, rather than to seize the ship. Anyway, they couldn't seize the *Meteor* with Whitey and the others on guard against just such an attempt.

"So you're going to Thunder Moon, sailor?" Nova Smith was saying. She shook her blonde head. "That's a messy way to kill yourself."

North looked at the star-girl with ironic amusement. "You're going to tell me how dangerous it is? I was out here when none of this riff-raff had ever heard of Uranus, and when you were in your cradle back on Earth."

Connor pushed through the crowd, his red face perspiring as he led another man up to North.

"This is Charlie Berdeau," Connor introduced buoyantly. "Knew him back on Jupiter, when he was running a Jovopolis gambling-joint. Used to clean me out there after every voyage, didn't you, Charlie?"

BERDEAU lit a green *rial* cigarette. Over the glow of the atomite lighter, his bold black eyes insolently appraised North's shabby figure.

The gambler was lean and dark, handsome in a faintly wolfish way. There was something too prominently predatory about the dashing good looks of his aquiline face, the gleam of his white teeth. His rich black synthesilk suit was of finest cut, and a beautiful Callistan fire-opal smoldered on his slender white hand.

"Connor tells me you need a stake for a promising expedition," drawled Berdeau with apparent disinterest.

North nodded curtly. "We need double anti-heat equipment for a twelve-man cruiser, and at least ten heavy insulite suits with individual anti-heaters."

"That's a big order of anti-heat equipment," Berdeau frowned. "Where are you going?"

"To Oberon," North answered levelly.

Berdeau burst into a laugh. "Don't tell me you're going there to hunt for levium?"

"What's so amusing about that?" John North snapped.

Berdeau chuckled. "There's never a month passes but some old space-rat comes in here to tell me how he's going to hunt for the mythical levium on Thunder Moon. You're about the hundredth that's wanted a stake."

"Did the others show you anything like this?" North demanded flatly.

He held out the little lead-glass vial he had borrowed from Aline. The shining blue grain of levium in it, pressing uncannily against the top of the vial, instantly erased the amusement from Berdeau's face.

"Did that levium come from Thunder Moon?" he asked swiftly.

"It did, and there's a lot more of it there, and we know where it is and how to reach it," North told him.

Berdeau's black eyes glowed with interest. "That's different! I think we can talk business. Come into my office."

"Said the spider to the fly," flipped Nova Smith.

Berdeau turned angrily on the blonde star-girl. "You keep out of this—I've had enough trouble with you! Find Lenning and Kells and Darm and send them to me."

North and Connor followed the interplanetary gambler through the noisy, revelling crowd into a small office.

Berdeau's floridly handsome face was eager as he asked, "Now, just where is the levium on Oberon? How do you figure to land on that hellish moon without being destroyed?"

John North laughed curtly. "You don't really think I'd tell you that? Here's our proposition: Stake us to the anti-heat equipment, and we'll sign a contract giving you one tenth of the levium we find."

The gambler frowned. "You ask me to put up twenty thousand dollars worth of equipment, yet you don't trust me."

North shrugged. "The secret isn't mine, and I can't give it away."

"But you can at least tell me more about it," Berdeau persuaded.

NORTH briefly narrated the tale of how Aline Laurel's father had found the levium, and of the legion of old-time space-men they had formed to go after it, and of the Company's opposition.

Berdeau's eyes narrowed. "If the Company's after it, there must be something to it," the gambler muttered thoughtfully.

There was suppressed excitement in his face. He paced the little office for

a moment and then appeared to come rapidly to a decision.

He thrust out his hand. "North, you may not trust me, but I'm going to trust you. I'm going to stake you to the equipment you need, and I won't ask you for any contract—your word is good enough for me."

Berdeau went to the door. "We'll buy the anti-heat equipment and take it to your ship right away, before the Company can interfere. Wait till I get the money."

"Now we're getting somewhere!" Connor exclaimed ebulliently as the gambler went out. "Didn't I tell you I'd fix things up, Johnny?"

But North felt a deep uneasiness. He hated doing business with one of the birds of prey who followed wealth from world to world. He didn't entirely trust the handsome gambler despite the man's apparent frankness.

Still, North told himself troubledly, there was no way they could lose by the deal. He hadn't given away the secret of the levium's location, and without that, no one could double-cross them.

He and Connor went out and found Berdeau talking earnestly to his three men. Lenning was a hulking, heavy-faced Earthman with an expressionless stare. Kells and Darm were hard-faced younger men.

"We're all ready!" Berdeau told North effusively. "Lenning and the boys will help you load the stuff. We've got a rocket-truck."

As they started out through the crowd, Nova Smith caught at North's sleeve. The blonde star-girl's pert face was anxious.

"Sailor, I want to talk to you a moment," she said urgently.

"Sorry, but we're in a hurry," John North replied brusquely, brushing past her to follow the others out the door.

"You've made a conquest, Johnny," chuckled Connor.

"A star-girl," muttered North contemptuously.

"Ah, she's a good kid," defended the Irishman. "The trouble with you is that you've got Aline on your mind."

The rocket-truck rattled down the noisy, brilliant street of Moontown toward one of the big outfitting warehouses. Wandering, begging Titanians skipped hastily out of its way. Drunken space-sailors and prospectors barely avoided its wheels. Yet the unearthly flood of green light that poured down from Uranus' huge hanging sphere lent an unreal beauty to this sordid place.

At the warehouse, Berdeau bargained keenly for the equipment. The main part of it was the eight massive anti-heaters for the ship. They looked like big silver cylinders. The outer shell encased powerful apparatus which, when fed power from cyclotrons, would radiate a continuous damping force that neutralized and destroyed the vibrations of radiant heat.

The ten heavy insulite suits had smaller anti-heaters fastened between the shoulders. The suits looked not unlike ordinary space-suits, except that they were of a laminated material embodying the most heat-resistant materials available. Wearing one of them, a man could walk in heat that would otherwise destroy him.

WHEN they had the heavy, expensive equipment stowed in the rocket-truck, Berdeau ordered Lenning to drive to the spaceport.

"I know you'll be wanting to get away as soon as possible," the gambler said to North. "I'll be waiting for you to come back with my share of that Levium!"

John North felt a certain relaxing of his uneasiness. It seemed that his

vague suspicions of Berdeau had been without foundation.

The rocket-truck left Moontown and started along the short road that led through the jungle to the spaceport. On either side of them, the weird fern-forest towered in green gloom. A big moon-bat swooped down into the path of their lights, and flashed startledly up again on flapping wings.

They were near the spaceport when John North glimpsed a figure in the road ahead. He exclaimed suddenly, and Lenning pulled up.

"What's the matter? Who is that?" Berdeau asked sharply. He and his men had drawn the atom-pistols they all wore at their belts.

"It's Steenie," North said worriedly, jumping down from the truck. "One of our crew—he's space-struck, and shouldn't be wandering here alone."

Steenie's vacant blue eyes were blinking against the rocket-truck's lamps when North and the others reached his side.

"Is that you, Johnny?" asked the space-struck sailor relievedly. "I'm glad it's you. I was going to go look for you, only I didn't know where to look."

And Steenie gestured wonderingly to the solemn, buzzing fern-jungle that rose around them in the viridescent glow of huge Uranus.

"Haven't I been on this world before, Johnny? It seems to me I was here once before, a long time ago."

"Sure, you were here years ago, Steenie," North told him soothingly. "Don't you remember, when you were Wenzi's chief pilot?"

"I was a pilot once, wasn't I?" Steenie said eagerly. "They said I was the greatest space-pilot of them all."

"You were that," North told him. "But you shouldn't be wandering around here alone, Steenie. Come on back to the *Meteor* with us."

Steenie's vacant eyes became troubled. "No, we can't go back to the ship Johnny. That's why I was going to look for you. The other men have the ship now."

"The other men? What other men?" Connor demanded alarmedly.

Steenie made a vague gesture. "The other men, in gray uniforms."

"Company men!" The dismayed exclamation exploded from John North's lips. "Young Sidney and his men have seized the *Meteor!*"

"How the devil would they take your ship if your pals were on guard as you said?" Berdeau's hissing voice demanded.

Steenie explained with childlike simplicity. "It was just a little while ago, Johnny. Whitey said I could go outside if I didn't go far from the ship. I wanted to look around. I was trying to remember if I hadn't been on this world before, back when I was a pilot—"

"Yes, but what did the men in gray do?" North brought him back to his tale. "How did they get into the *Meteor?*"

"I saw the men in gray going toward our ship," Steenie said earnestly. "They shot things that *popped* around the ship's door. Whitey and the others there went to sleep. Then the men in gray went into the ship. I was afraid to go there then. I thought I'd try to find you."

"Sleep-gas!" North said fiercely. "Sidney and his men used sleep-gas pellets to take the ship."

"WE'LL soon take it back from them!" flamed Connor. The Irishman's heavy atom-pistol jumped into his hand. "Come on, Johnny—we'll blast the damned Company whippersnappers right out of our way!"

"Wait a minute!" North said urgently. "We can't do anything that way. There's only two of us—"

Charles Berdeau's quick voice interrupted. The gambler's handsome face was wolf-tense in the green planet-light.

"There's *six* of us in this, North! We'll help you recapture your ship."

North was amazed. "You're willing to buck the Company?"

Berdeau's white teeth gleamed. "Why not? I've got twenty thousand invested in your expedition, and a fortune to win if you succeed. I'm not going to see you fail."

"Ah, that's talking!" exulted Connor. "Why, the six of us can wipe up this moon with them."

"Take it easy," rapped North. "We don't want bloodshed. Maybe we can retake the *Meteor* without it."

They cut off the lights of the rocket-truck, and started on along the road through the fern-jungle. At the edge of the spaceport, they stopped the vehicle and advanced around the edge of the spaceport to reconnoiter on foot.

Concealed by the shadow of the fern-jungle edge, they studied the scene a hundred yards away. The *Meteor* lay where they had left it, light spilling from its open door. But now a trio of gray-uniformed men armed with atom-pistols stood watchfully outside the door.

"I can't understand Sidney's seizing the ship," North muttered. "I was sure his orders would be to trail us to Oberon."

"Come on, and we'll rush 'em!" Connor said, his voice fierce.

"We can pick them off from right here," Berdeau said callously.

"Wait—we don't want unnecessary bloodshed," John North said rapidly. "If I could get into the ship secretly, and surprise them—"

"How the devil can you get into the *Meteor* secretly?" Connor demanded. "There's only one door, and they're standing right in it."

North turned quickly to Berdeau. "Have you got a chainwrench in that rocket-truck? One big enough to take out a rocket-tube with?"

"Holy comets, I see your idea!" Connor exclaimed. "Maybe you could get into the ship that way."

Charles Berdeau was frowning. "Yes, there's a kit of tools in the truck. But I don't understand—"

"You wait here, all of you," North told them tensely. "I'm going to get into the *Meteor* my own way. If I succeed in taking them by surprise, I'll signal you to come on."

"Is there going to be a fight, Johnny?" Steenie asked wonderingly.

But North was already slipping back through the shadow of the jungle toward the rocket-truck. He scrabbled in its tool-locker until he found the heavy chain-wrench, used for dismounting defective rocket-tubes. With it, and a smaller wrench, he started on his mission.

North circled around the edge of the spaceport, keeping in the deep shadow of the tall fern-jungle, until he was on the other side of the *Meteor* from the door. Then he bolted out across the level ground, through the green glow of great Uranus, running softly and swiftly until he reached the shadows at the tail of the looming ship.

He crouched, listening. He could hear a dim murmur of voices from the Company men on guard at the ship door. But they could not see him, back here at the tail. The men were intently guarding the door that was the only entrance to the ship.

BESIDE NORTH, there projected the big tail rocket-tubes of the

craft. There were sixteen of the massive tubes, each of them two feet in diameter. North rapidly fastened his chainwrench around the lowest tube. Then he paused, before commencing to unscrew the tube.

This was the danger point, he knew. The tube was bound to make a noise as it began to unscrew. North hesitated uncertainly. As he paused, he noticed that amid the low medley of jungle sounds there was the screeching scream of a moon-bat, regularly repeated, quite loudly.

North timed the interval of the moon-bat's rhythmic calls. He braced himself, gripping the chain-wrench. And just as the moon-bat screamed again, he exerted all his strength to twist the rocket-tube. The tube unscrewed a little with a sharp grating sound as the moon-bat called.

North crouched tense. But there was no alarm from the guards at the door. They had not heard. Breathing more easily, he unscrewed the rocket-tube with infinite care. He had a bad moment when it finally came free. The weight of the massive tube was such that he had to strain every muscle to lower it to the ground without making a betraying thud.

Removal of the tube had left an opening of two feet diameter in the stubby tail of the *Meteor*. North reached inside it, into the flame-blackened power-pipe that had led to the tube. He unbolted the flange of the pipe and in a few moments had a section of it lifted out.

Dropping the tools, he crawled in through the opening. He stood in the dark cyc-room at the stern of the *Meteor*. Around him dimly loomed the massive cyclotrons and the labyrinthine maze of power-pipes, feed-lines and control lines. North drew his atom-pistol, and started softly forward through the ship.

He heard voices from the main cabin. He stepped silently along the narrow catwalk, and peered tautly into the long, lighted compartment.

CHAPTER VI

Death in the "Meteor"

THE first thing he saw was that Whitey Jones and Dorak and Hansen sat on the floor against the wall, their hands and feet tightly bound. Whitey's single arm was lashed against his body. The massive face of the shock-headed blond giant was crimson with rage.

Aline Laurel stood erect and unbound. Her fine face was white with fury as she confronted Philip Sidney. The gray-uniformed young Company officer, his back toward North, was speaking earnestly to the girl.

"But I really seized the ship for *your* sake, Miss Laurel!" Sidney was exclaiming. "I couldn't see a girl like you go to a horrible death on Thunder Moon in this chimerical expedition."

"Do you expect me to believe that?" Aline demanded, her dark eyes flashing. "After all that your Company has done to cheat us?"

Sidney made a helpless shrugging gesture. "Please believe me," he pleaded. "The fact is that the Company ordered me to let you all go on to Oberon, to follow you there and wait until you had the levium before we attacked you. But I couldn't let you go to that hellish moon."

North stepped swiftly and softly forward and jammed his atom-pistol into the young officer's back.

"Don't make a move, Sidney," he rasped. "Just raise your hands and don't call to your men outside!"

Sidney's arms shot up startedly. In-

credulous amazement was replaced by sharp joy on Aline's white face.

"John North!" she exclaimed in a low voice. "But how—"

"Johnny, they were waiting here for you and Mike to get back!" Whitey was saying excitedly. "They got us with sleep-gas pellets!"

"I know," North said. "This is what they used to do it with."

He had been searching Sidney's pockets, keeping his weapon jammed against the other's back. And in one jacket pocket he had found a stubby little pellet-gun with a magazine of sleep-gas pellets.

"Aline, untie Whitey and the others," John North said swiftly. "Sidney, you back against the wall. You take care of him, Whitey."

Philip Sidney backed against the wall, and turned to face North. The young officer's clean-cut face was flushed with anger, but he did not resist being tied.

"I've got to take care of the men at the door," North whispered. "Wait here, all of you—"

Gripping the little pellet-gun, North crept along the catwalk to the airlock chamber of the door. The three Company men still stood watchfully in the opening, peering alertly out into the greenlit night.

North sighted the pellet-gun and triggered rapidly. The almost silent hiss of compressed air drove the pellets of the weapon whizzing. The pellets hit the heads and shoulders of the three Company men, and exploded with a *whoosh* of magically expanding white vapor.

The Company men started an alarmed turning movement, but never completed it. They crumpled and collapsed as that super-anaesthetic white vapor entered their nostrils.

North dragged their prostrate bodies clear of the ship and then waved his arm in urgent signal.

"Connor! Berdeau!" he called in a low voice. "All clear! Bring the stuff here at once!"

HE HEARD them start the rocket-truck. Running without lights, it came rattling across the greenlit spaceport toward the *Meteor*.

North went back quickly into the main cabin. Sidney had been tied into one of the space-chairs.

"We've got to get off this moon at once," North rapped. "There are other Company officers here. They'll come to investigate."

"What about the anti-heater equipment?" Whitey cried.

"It's coming now," North replied. He told them in a few rapid sentences of his deal with Charles Berdeau. "Is that all right, Aline? I mean, offering Berdeau ten percent of the levium?"

"Of course!" she cried joyfully. "That solves our biggest difficulty—getting the anti-heat equipment."

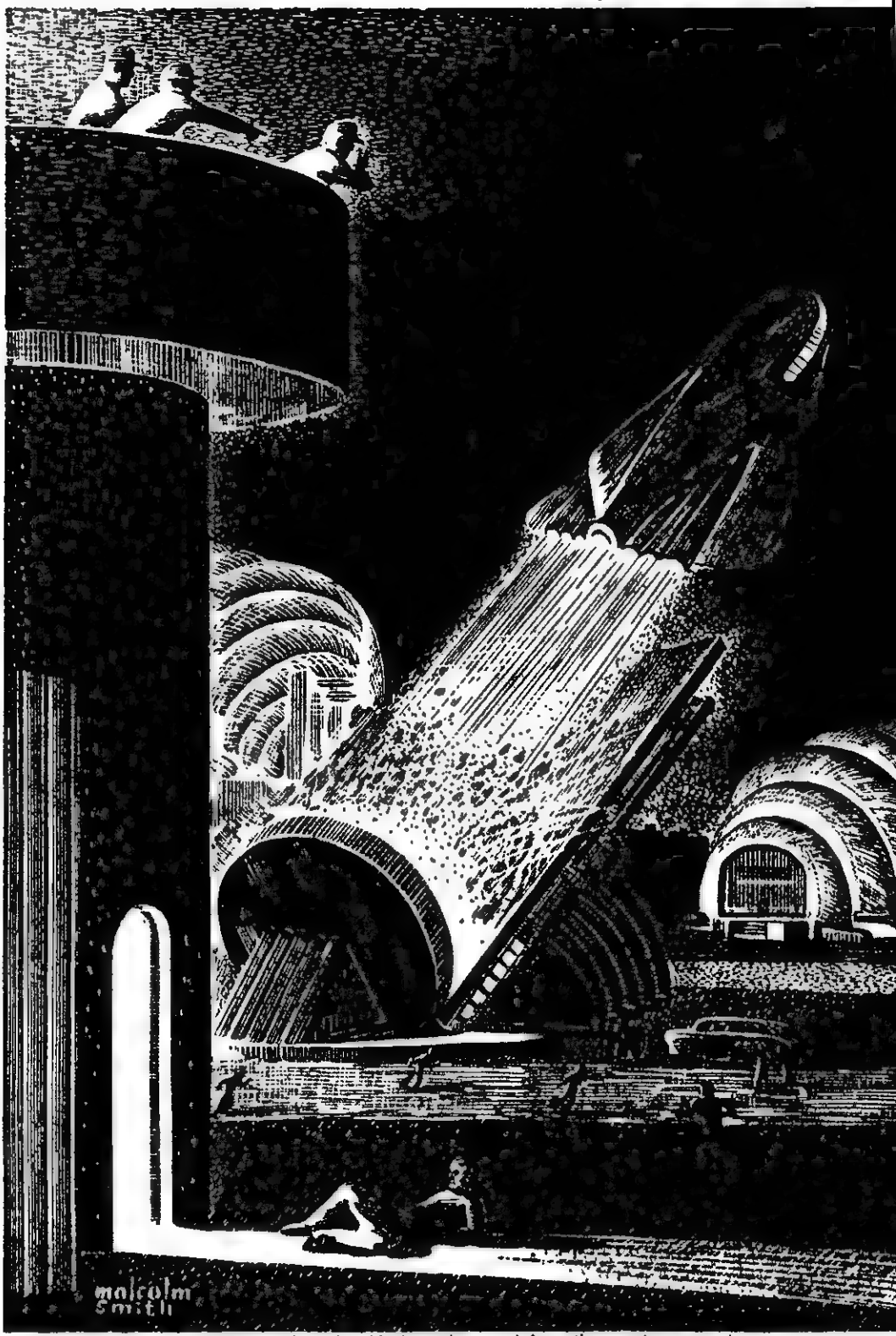
Philip Sidney spoke up from the space-chair in which he was tied. The young officer addressed himself to North.

"So now you've tied up with Charles Berdeau, the biggest scoundrel unhung in the System," the young officer said scathingly. His eyes snapped. "North, you're doing a criminal thing if you take this girl to Thunder Moon."

"You're just trying to stop us so you can get the levium for your Company!" Aline charged hotly.

"Believe me, Miss Laurel, I'm thinking of your safety," Sidney said earnestly. "This whole venture to Thunder Moon is madness. But if North and the others must go, they should at least leave you here."

North reluctantly admitted to himself that Sidney was sincere. He could



Rockets roaring, the ship leaped upward from the great spaceport

see that the young Company officer had conceived more than a passing admiration for Aline Laurel.

"He's really right, Aline," North muttered troubledly. "You ought to stay here while we go on to Oberon."

"I won't do it, and I don't want any argument about it," the girl declared with unexpected firmness.

Connor stuck his frog-like face excitedly into the main cabin, with Charles Berdeau and Steenie behind him.

"Fine work, Johnny!" exulted the Irishman. "Ah, this is a night to make up for all those dull, dead months on Earth!"

North rapidly introduced Berdeau. The gambler's black eyes ignored the others but rested with unconcealed appreciation on the girl.

"I didn't know I was to have such a charming business partner, Miss Laurel," he said, white teeth flashing in a smile. "If I'd known—"

North interrupted urgently. "We've got to get that equipment aboard in a hurry! Every minute our ship remains here is dangerous."

"I'll have Lenning and the boys bring the stuff in," Berdeau replied coolly. He strode back outside.

"Whitey, see that they put the stuff in the cyc-room where we can hook it up quickly," North sweated. "I've got to replace that rocket-tube I took out of the tail. Connor, you can help me."

HE HURRIED out. Lenning and Berdeau's other two men were already beginning to carry the massive anti-heaters into the ship.

North hastened back to the tail of the *Meteor*. He rapidly replaced the feed-pipe flange, and then he and Connor lifted the heavy rocket-tube back into place and started to screw it in.

As he tightened the tube with the chain-wrench, North heard them carrying the last of the heavy anti-heaters aboard. At that moment someone grabbed his arm.

He turned in a flash, dropping the wrench to snatch out his atom-pistol. But it was not, as he had expected, a Company man who had stolen upon him in the shadows. It was a small, white figure—a girl in a scanty synthesilk dress whose face was a strained white blur in the dark.

"Sailor, I came here to warn you!" her low voice hurried. "You wouldn't stop to listen back there in the Pleasure Palace—"

"Nova Smith!" North was astounded, then angry. "What the devil do you mean by following us?"

The star-girl gripped his arm more tightly. "Sailor, *listen!* Berdeau's planning to doublecross you! I heard him talking to Lenning and the others there in the Pleasure Palace. He's planning to jump you and your friends before you leave here. He doesn't mean to let you go without him. He wants all that levium for himself!"

"The girl's space-struck!" Connor gasped. "It doesn't make sense."

"I tell you, it's true!" Nova said fiercely. "You did me a big favor tonight and I wanted to warn you. You wouldn't stop to listen so I followed you out here—waited till I saw a chance to speak to you out of Berdeau's hearing—"

All John North's suppressed suspicion of Berdeau flared into flame on the instant. He had been puzzled all along by the gambler's surprisingly cooperative attitude, but had thought there was no chance of trickery.

North's atom-pistol was in his hand. He told Connor swiftly, "Mike, come with me! You stay here, Nova."

At that moment came the blasting crash of an atom-gun, echoing mufflledly from inside the *Meteor*. Then a sharp

scream, a furious shout.

"Hell, we're too late!" swore Connor, plunging wildly forward.

North was ahead of him as they reached the door of the ship. They burst in to the main cabin, ready to trigger their weapons.

But North stopped, appalled. Hansen lay on the floor, his breast blackened by the fatal blast of an atom-gun. Whitey and Dorak, their faces livid, had their hands up.

Charles Berdeau faced North from behind Aline. The gambler had his atom-pistol levelled at the girl's back.

"You too, North!" snapped Berdeau. "Drop those guns and raise your hands or the girl gets a blast in the back!"

There was no possible reply to that threat. Slowly, trembling with fury, North and Connor dropped their weapons.

NORTH heard a sharp gasp of horror from behind him. Nova Smith had followed them into the ship. Berdeau's flaring eyes glimpsed the star-girl.

"So you came to warn them, Nova?" he rasped. "You'll regret that. Stand over there beside them. None of you try anything, or you'll get what this pal of yours on the floor got for resisting."

Lenning and Kells were hastily taking the weapons of North and his friends. Darm, Berdeau's third man, stood at the end of the cabin his atom-pistol reinforcing the gambler's commands.

Connor was still staring incredulously at Hansen's dead body on the floor. The Irishman was muttering frozenly.

"They killed Hansen," Connor said, unbelievingly. "Hansen, that sailed beside me for thirty years. Why, they can't do that. Why—"

The berserk look came into Connor's raging eyes. Berdeau saw it and yelled a warning.

"You and the girl both get it if you try anything!"

No threat to himself could have penetrated Connor's blood-madness and halted him. But the threat to Aline stopped him.

He choked. His voice was a shaking whisper. "Berdeau, I'll kill you for this."

North saw Philip Sidney watching with wide, horrified eyes from the space-chair in which he was bound. At that moment, Steenie came wandering into the cabin from the cyc-room.

"Johnny, can I pilot the ship a little when we start?" Steenie asked eagerly. "You know, I used to be a good pilot—"

His voice trailed off into silence as his vacant blue eyes fastened puzzledly on Hansen's body. "Somebody's hurt Hansen," he said, childlike distress in his voice. "Who was it hurt Hansen?"

With a contemptuous, brutal sweep of his arm, the hulking Lenning sent Steenie crashing back against the wall.

"Now listen to me, all of you," Berdeau's voice rasped. "We're going to Oberon after that levium. But *I* am running the expedition now."

North's blood was pounding ragingly in his temples. But he forced himself to speak steadily.

"Berdeau, the two girls can't help you get the levium. At least leave them here."

"I'm leaving no one here to set the Company or others on my trail," rapped the gambler. He glanced viciously at the star-girl. "Especially Nova, whom I owe something for trying to wreck my plans."

Nova Smith's small figure stiffened angrily, and there was no fear on her pert, painted face as she jerked her blonde head.

"I'm only sorry I wasn't in time to queer the whole thing," she defied the

gambler.

"As for Miss Laurel," rasped Berdeau, "she's my ace card. Neither I nor my men can pilot a space-ship. But you men can, North. And you're going to do it for me. You're going to do it, because Lenning is going to keep a gun on Miss Laurel every minute. And at the first sign of disobedience or mutiny from any of you, an atom-blast will spoil her beauty."

ALINE LAUREL spoke to North. There were tears still glimmering in her dark eyes but her voice was level.

"I'm not afraid, John," she said. "You do what you think is best and pay no attention to his threats against me."

But North realized that he was checkmated. Bitterly as they longed to avenge Hansen's death, they could not attempt it when their first move would condemn Aline.

He spoke in a low voice to Whitey and Connor and Dorak. "He's got us boxed, boys. We'll have to do as he says."

"Now you are showing sense," Berdeau applauded ironically. The gambler laughed as his black eyes mockingly swept their livid faces. "Hard to take, isn't it? But you senile old-timers ought to have known better than to come to space again. The frontier's too tough for you, these days."

Then Berdeau said harshly, "Miss Laurel, I want the written directions your father left for finding the levium. Hand them over, or I'll have Lenning search you for them."

Furiously, Aline thrust the scrap of yellowed paper at him. The gambler's black eyes were bright as he glanced at the scrawled writing.

Then he told her, "You take that space-chair there. Lenning, sit across from her and keep her covered every minute. The rest of you prepare to take off at once. North, you'll pilot the ship."

The man Darm dragged Hansen's body outside, and closed the ship's door. Connor went back to start the cycs, Kells going watchfully with him.

The gambler motioned North toward the control-room, and followed him there. As North slowly took the pilot-chair, Berdeau strapped into the co-pilot seat beside him. He held his atom-pistol ready for action in his hand.

"Take off for Oberon at once," he ordered curtly. "I needn't warn you not to try any tricks, North. You know the consequences."

Helpless to disobey, North took the space-stick. His throat was dry, his whole body shaking with raging emotion.

"Blasting off!" he called hoarsely back into the ship.

He jammed the cyc-pedal to the floor. The old *Meteor* bounded upward through the green planet-light with a roar of rocket-tubes.

They slanted up over the greenlit jungles of Titania. The scream of splitting air died rapidly outside as the old cruiser climbed to clear space. The huge bulk of cloudy green Uranus loomed on their left.

Less than a hundred thousand miles outward from them marched the sullen crimson sphere of Thunder Moon. The ship started blasting steadily toward it, its cycs droning loud and the tail tubes thundering.

North felt dazed by this wreck of all their hopes. This last space venture of himself and his aging comrades was ending in disaster. Peters and Hansen were dead. And Berdeau and his criminals commanded their ship as they rushed on toward the most perilous spot in the System.

CHAPTER VII

Thunder Moon!

THE outermost satellite of Uranus was unique among the moons of the Solar System. It was not large, this moon Oberon that had received such forbidding name and fame. It was little more than a thousand miles in diameter, and its small mass should long ago have cooled to quiescence like the other satellites.

But Oberon had never cooled, never since the day when it and its parent world had been flung off by the Sun. Much of its mass had solidified, but beneath that solid crust raged unquenchable internal fires forever fed by a too-great radiactive content of its core. Flames from its fiery heart burst ceaselessly through rifts and craters in the crust, and fountained up from the surging molten rock of the Flaming Ocean.

Wrapped in its gloomy, smoky haze, the volcanic moon was an ever more appalling spectacle as the *Meteor* drew toward it, hour by hour. North had kept their speed throttled down, stretching out the traverse as long as possible. His mind was still feverishly searching for some means of turning the tables on Berdeau and his men.

But North could think of nothing. The gambler, from the co-pilot seat, watched his every move. And the first sign of mutiny, North knew, would seal Aline Laurel's death-warrant. He dared attempt nothing until a better opportunity presented on the dangerous moon they were now approaching.

North spoke tautly to the man beside him. "It's time we hooked up those anti-heaters. We'll need them going every minute we're on Oberon."

Berdeau's black eyes narrowed. "All right, North—you can call one of your pals to take the controls while you hook them up."

Dorak came forward to relieve North. The stolid space-man's eyes glanced toward Berdeau with open hate, but he said nothing as he took over.

North's gaze flew anxiously to Aline as he went back into the main cabin. She was pale, but there was a courageous lift to her chin. Sidney, sitting in the space-chair next her, was talking to her earnestly. The hulking Lenning had his atom-pistol on his knee, trained directly at her. And one of Berdeau's two other men watched alertly from the end of the cabin.

"I'm all right, John," Aline said in answer to North's wordless inquiry.

"She's not all right—she's in deadly danger, and it's your fault," Philip Sidney said bitterly to North. "You would bring her."

"That's not so—I insisted on coming," Aline said indignantly.

But North himself made no answer. He felt heavily that the young Company officer's accusation was only too justified.

He looked around. "Where's Nova?"

"Back in my cabin," Aline informed. "I lent her a jacket and slacks—she couldn't wear that dance-costume of hers here."

North motioned to Whitey. "I've got to go back and hook up the anti-heaters. We'll soon reach Oberon. I'll need your help."

Lenning, watching and listening, spat an order to the hard-faced young man on guard at the ed of the cabin. "Go with them, Darm."

As North shouldered back along the narrow catwalk to the cyc-room with Whitey, he muttered under his breath to the one-armed giant.

"If we could dig out an atom-pistol and blast that brute Lenning before he could harm Aline—"

"No chance, Johnny," murmured Whitey Jones. "Darm and Kells went through the whole ship for weapons. They've got us cold."

"No whispering, you two!" snarled the man Darm, behind them.

BACK in the crowded cyc-room, which was shuddering to the thunderous droning roar of the massive cyclotrons, they found Connor glaring silently at the third criminal, Kells.

They set to work to hook up the big anti-heaters to the cycs. Darm and Kells watched them closely. Yet as they stooped to fasten the power-feed lines, North found an opportunity to whisper to Connor.

"Don't start anything yet, Mike! Our chance will come when we reach Thunder Moon."

Connor's whisper was hoarse with passion. "Don't any of you kill Lenning when the time comes. He's mine. I found out he shot Hansen!"

They started the big anti-heaters, turning the power into them. The massive mechanisms began a pulsing throb. A halo of blue force burgeoned out from them—a dim nimbus surrounding the flying *Meteor*. It was the damping force that could effectually neutralize radiant heat.

"That ought to keep the worst of the heat out," North muttered.

He started back forward. Nova Smith met him in the narrow catwalk. North stared wonderingly at the star-girl.

The soft gray space-jacket and slacks had changed her appearance. Even more transformation had been wrought by the fact that she had scrubbed away the garish paint on her face and combed her yellow hair smoothly back.

"Don't look so surprised, sailor," she told North a little resentfully. "You didn't think I *liked* wearing all that stuff on my face, did you? But a star-girl has to dress the part."

"You shouldn't have tried to warn me, Nova," he said gloomily. "It only got you into trouble yourself."

"Sailor, I've been in trouble half my life," she replied with a gamin grin. "That cheap crook Berdeau doesn't scare me any."

"Move along, you two!" snarled Kells warningly behind them.

North shouldered forward through the cabin toward the control-room. Steenie touched his arm anxiously to delay him a moment.

"Can I pilot the ship a little now, Johnny?" Steenie asked eagerly for the hundredth time. "You know, I was a good pilot once."

"I know, and we'll let you pilot some time soon," North told him hastily. "You go back now and be quiet, Steenie."

Dorak rose to yield him the pilot-chair. "Take over again, Johnny. We'll be landing soon, and my eyes aren't good enough for that."

Thunder Moon now filled half the sky with its crimson, haze-wrapped sphere. They saw its atmosphere as a roiling gloom of smoke, shot through with red lightings of bursting fires beneath.

North was wire-taut as he began to edge the *Meteor* around in a closing spiral, into the smoky atmosphere. He called back to those in the cabin to strap in, as they spiralled toward the volcanic moon.

Far around the curve of the moon, he spotted the steady red glow in the haze that marked the location of the Flaming Ocean. He slanted the ship in that direction. The rising, scream of parting atmosphere crawled at his nerves. He strained his eyes tensely to peer through the drifting smoke.

Berdeau, looking at the yellowed

paper he had taken from Aline, spoke harshly. "The basalt plateau old Laurel mentioned must be the only safe landing-place. Be sure we land there, North—or we all die together."

"I know," rapped John North. "I've no desire to kill my friends."

His mind feverishly repeated Thorn Laurel's written directions.

"Levium deposit in west one of three crater-peaks rising from Flaming Ocean. Landing possible only on basalt plateau near spear-shaped bay on south coast . . . Use stone raft to cross Ocean to peaks. Look out for the Fieries."

NORTH could see almost nothing through the roiling smoke beneath —nothing but occasional geysers of flame from volcanic rifts. The descending *Meteor* shuddered wildly from impact of shattering vibrations in the smoky haze. The crashes of thunder that had given Oberon its name were each few moments drowning out the roar of the cycs and staccato detonation of the rockets.

A huge glow pulsed down there in the haze ahead. The clouds of smoke seemed thinner above it, due to the atmospheric currents. The ship dived unsteadily down into that area of thinner haze. Below lay a vast sea of evilly crimson lava, upon whose waveless surface danced changing flames.

They were plunging toward the dreaded Flaming Ocean of Thunder Moon. North frantically jerked the space-stick, cutting in keel and lateral rockets to swing them southward. But the ferocious atmospheric currents above this hell-sea of molten rock batted the *Meteor* about like a leaf in a storm.

He fought the ship's nose around and jammed the cyc-pedal to the floor. The old craft leaped with a gallant surge of power, struggling southward over the molten expanse. Then, far to westward, North glimpsed three steep crater-peaks whose black pinnacles rose sheer from the red lava.

"There's the three craters!" yelled Charles Berdeau, treasure-lust flaming in his eyes.

No ship could land on the precipitous slopes of those towering peaks, North knew. He flung the lurching *Meteor* toward the distant southern shore of the flaming sea.

"Look for that spear-shaped bay!" he ordered hoarsely.

The continent south of the Flaming Ocean rushed toward them. It was a nightmare spectacle under the fire-shot pall of smoke. A tumbled wilderness of upheaved rocks smoking fiercely in the terrific heat, its infernal rivers were red-blazing streams of living lava flowing down to the molten sea from the fiery springs in which they spouted to the surface. Farther southward, a range of great volcanoes were jetting clouds of ashes.

North's eyes desperately searched the coast of the infernal continent but saw no indentation of spear-like shape. He twitched the space-stick to turn the ship westward along the shore of the molten sea. But the screaming currents of the smoke spun the *Meteor* dizzily upward, the crash of its lateral rocket-tubes only serving to send it farther out of control.

Hoarse, bellowing thunder in the smoky haze about them seemed to mock North's frantic efforts to right the plunging craft. At perilously low altitude, he got it back on something like even keel, and drove it west along the burning coast with the full blast of its tail tubes.

"There's the bay!" yelled Berdeau, pointing. "But where in hell's name is the basalt plateau?"

North had glimpsed the deep, nar-

row indentation in the shore at the same moment as the gambler.

He sent the ship plunging recklessly down through the roiling smoke. His eyes were fiercely searching the smoking shore of the bay. Then he saw the long, slightly upraised ledge of black basalt that lay almost a mile from the molten sea.

"There it is—but it's terribly small to land a ship on in these currents!" North exclaimed.

THE *Meteor* was rushing headlong down toward the fiery coast. North's eyes, tensely estimating distances through the billowing smoke, perceived that they would fall short of the basalt ledge.

He frantically kicked all the power of the cycs into the keel-tubes. The jerk of the downward blast kept the ship from losing altitude for a moment longer, as it plunged screaming through the smoke.

Hellish clouds of rushing black vapor obscured the window for a terrible second. Bawling of thunder in the haze about them derided them. Then screaming currents tore the blinding smoke away from in front.

"You've overshot it!" Berdeau shouted thinly over the uproar.

The *Meteor* was plunging down past the narrow basalt ledge toward the river of blazing lava that flowed along its southward side.

North's hands jerked the space-stick with blurring speed and his foot thrust and eased and thrust again on the cyc-pedal in a split-second.

Crash! Crash-crash! The ship stood on its tail from the mad blast of its rockets, rolled back over and spun to the laterals, and then sagged toward the basalt ledge on the flaming columns of its keel-jets. A jarring bump, a screech of scraping metal—and they had landed.

"By God, you're a pilot, North!" swore Berdeau.

Then the gambler gestured meaningly with his atom-pistol. "Now get back into the cabin with the others."

North felt limp and shaky from reaction as he unstrapped. It had taken every ounce of his spacemanship to achieve that precarious landing.

In the main cabin, the others were peering through the windows in fascinated awe, Berdeau's men still watching them closely. Drifting smoke veiled most of the infernal scene outside. But the parked ship was shuddering every few moments to the bawling crash of thunder. And its interior was uncomfortably warm despite the protective nimbus of the anti-heaters.

"What a terrible world!" whispered Aline Laurel.

"It's sure no summer resort," declared Nova. "I thought we were goners when we started to fall toward that fiery ocean."

"That was a wonderful landing, North," said young Philip Sidney with warm admiration. "Whoever taught you piloting knew his business!"

North answered haggardly, "The greatest pilot that ever flew space taught me. There he is, over there—what's left of him."

And he nodded toward Steenie, who sat staring out at the smoke-veiled scene with childish wonder in his vacant blue eyes.

Charles Berdeau appeared in the cabin door. Connor jumped to his feet, and Whitey Jones' massive figure stiffened. But the gambler's black eyes swept their hostile faces coolly. He spoke crisply.

"It's time you all understood the situation clearly," Berdeau rasped. "I want that levium deposit and I mean to have it. But I don't want to have

to kill any of you, unless you make it necessary."

"Big-hearted Charlie, they called him back on Titania," cracked Nova Smith.

Berdeau shot the star-girl an ugly glance but went on evenly. "Now listen to reason. We've got the atom-guns and there's nothing you can do. This world is dangerous, and the sooner we get off it, the safer you'll all be. Cooperate with us, and I'll promise to give you a tenth share of the levium when we get back."

"What kind of 'cooperation' do you want from us?" North demanded.

THE gambler explained. "It's not going to be easy to get out to those crater-peaks in the Ocean and get the levium. We'll need help. Give us that help without starting a fight, and you'll all profit by it."

"We'll see you damned before we help you and your filthy killers!" flamed Connor.

Whitey nodded his massive blond head in grim agreement. "If it wasn't for that gun covering Aline, we'd be at your throat now, Berdeau."

But North had been thinking. The thin edge of a desperate idea had entered his mind. If he could find a chance for the risky strategem—

"What's the use, boys?" North said heavily to his comrades. "They have us cold. We have no other choice than to do as they say."

They stared at him unbelievingly. Dorak asked incredulously, "You mean we should do what these murderers ask?"

"What else can we do?" John North countered in a hopeless voice.

Nova Smith's blue eyes flashed at North. "Sailor, don't be foolish!" exclaimed the star-girl. "Can't you see that Berdeau will only put you all out of the way as soon as he's safe back on Titania with the levium?"

"I've warned you before about talking too much, Nova!" flared the gambler. "Another word out of you—"

John North knew that the star-girl had told the truth. He knew quite well that Berdeau would use them to help him secure the levium and pilot him back to Titania, and then would dispose of them swiftly.

But he shrugged helplessly. "We've got to do as they say," he repeated. "If we don't, it means Aline's life."

Connor and Whitey and Dorak gave in, at that reminder. Their fierce silence as they faced Berdeau was confession of defeat.

"Now you're being sensible," the gambler approved coolly. Then he gave his orders. "North, you and Connor will go out with Lenning and me in a preliminary reconnaissance. The first job is to figure out a way to get out across the Flaming Ocean to those craters."

The gambler added, "Darm, you and Kells will remain on guard here. Remember to watch Miss Laurel every minute."

North's heart was beating with suppressed excitement as he got out four of the insulite suits. The suits were not unlike ordinary space-suits, except that their stiff black material was of far heavier insulation, and their helmets were massive, opaque ones with only an eye-slit in front. Each had its own oxygenator and standard short-radius space-suit phone.

Berdeau and Lenning got into the garments first, and then North and Connor. They started the individual anti-heaters attached to the shoulders of the suits. Each of them was at once shrouded in a blue nimbus of heat-neutralizing force.

"Don't forget your moon-shoes," North warned, stooping to slip on his

own heavy, lead-soled sandals. "Surface gravity here is low."

Berdeau and the hulking Lenning both carried their atom-pistols in their gloved hands as they opened the air-lock. North and Connor stepped into the air-lock first at Berdeau's order.

"You two go first, North," ordered Berdeau. "And you will stay twenty feet in front of us at all times. Understand?"

North and the Irishman passed out through the air-lock. They stepped onto the rough black basalt outside the parked ship.

Drifting clouds of black smoke swirled about them. Ashes were raining down upon them, pattering on their heavy helmets. And even through the heavy insulation of the suits and the protective nimbus of their anti-heaters, penetrated suffocating heat. They had stepped out into a temperature of hundreds of degrees.

THE basalt lurched and shuddered under their feet, as distant convulsions of the tortured fire-moon rocked its unstable crust. Each of those convulsive tremors was accompanied by an ear-splitting, echoing detonation, like the drum-fire of heavy artillery.

Gunnings of cosmic thunder that rocked and rolled and ebbed and then burst forth again! That hoarse hubbub of colossal reverberations through the fire-shot gloom crushed the mind by its sheer volume. Added to the suffocating heat and blinding smoke, it almost dazed North.

Berdeau's voice came to him on the space-suit phone. The gambler sounded as though he also were a little stunned.

"God, what a world!" he was muttering.

He and Lenning had emerged from the ship. North turned toward them, and pointed through the smoke. "The Ocean lies this way."

"You two lead," ordered the gambler watchfully. "We'll follow."

And Berdeau and his hulking aide remained well behind North and Connor as they started forward through the smoky gloom.

North dared not attempt the precarious plan he had formed, so near the ship. His scheme was desperate to the last degree. Failure would cost not only their own lives, but probably Aline's also.

He trudged forward with Connor on the heavy moon-shoes, groping a way through the smoke. The rocking bursts of thunder from distant splitting rocks seemed louder than ever to his ringing ears. They were soon out of sight of the ship in the hazy gloom.

The heat was intense, even through the nimbus of protective force that shrouded his insulite suit. He knew that without his anti-heater, the suit could not protect him for a minute from these terrific temperatures.

Connor uttered a sharp exclamation of alarm and jerked North back. They had reached the west edge of the basalt plateau. They stood a few yards above a blazing river of molten red lava.

North understood they had veered in a wrong direction in the smoke, and he changed their course. Greater heat beat through his suit, and he glimpsed through the smoke the pulsing crimson glow of the Flaming Ocean.

They two stood gazing petrifiedly, Berdeau and Lenning also gazing dazedly from a distance behind them. The spectacle was awesome. The great flood of molten crimson lava stretched before them to the horizon. Its red glow glared up into the sky. No wind could have stirred that heavy expanse of liquid rock, but the tidal pull of the parent planet caused long, surging

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FUTURE CITY ON EARTH

BY HENRY GADE

Our back cover presents artist Paul's conception of the Earth city of the future. Here are the scientific facts on which his conception is based

IN the holocaust of today's war, with giant bombs smashing cities all over the earth, the picture of the future looks pretty grim. But in a scientific sense, all this destruction will lead toward a great quickening of progress toward the city of the future that artist Frank R Paul has so brilliantly pictured on our back cover.

It is a scientific fact that war speeds up progress, and rebuilding of ruined cities is done with past errors in construction and planning firmly in mind. Therefore, let us picture the London of tomorrow; London because it is perhaps the most bomb-torn city in the world today.

Already we realize that the future will be called the Plastic Age. Plastics are coming into their own with dramatic suddenness. In January, 1942, a new, secret plastic has been developed that will replace aluminum in aircraft. It may easily win the war for us. Everywhere in industry plastic materials are springing up

Therefore, our new city of London is not a city of steel and stone, of brick and mortar, of wood and nails—it is a city of seamless, cast and rolled plastic materials of brilliant and beautiful colors. It is a city of curves and streamlines; of sweep and rounded beauty. It is the city that was faintly suggested in the buildings of recent world's fairs.

In building this city, engineers will consider first the most vexing of all modern problems, that of traffic. No longer will the pedestrian use the same right of way with the auto. No longer will traffic deaths be the spectre that condemns our mechanical civilization to the guise of monster killer, worse than war itself.

Here in this new city will be broad, plastic-paved walks, lined with garden areas, brilliantly sunlit, and uncrowded by towering buildings. There will be no "canyon of Wall Street" where the sun shines only at high noon. Instead pedestrians, clad in colors as brilliant as the buildings that sweep gracefully away from the wide walks, strolling in perfect safety beyond even the roar of traffic

Ordinary vehicular traffic, the common traffic of the private citizen, will be on separate levels, slightly below the pedestrian walks, but still in the bright light of day, and affording perfect vision, straight, wide roadway, safety curves There will be no two-way traffic. One way highways will be the rule. Traffic will be amazingly swift. Traffic lights will be a museum exhibit. There will be no annoying stop-and-start driving.

Far down in the bowels of the city will be the merchandise traffic tunnels. Here too there will be brilliant, non-glare light, artificially produced. Here too there will be no stop-and-start driving. Loading areas will be created, reached by feeder ramps, which will solve all parking problems. Still further down will be the fast express liners that lead from the city, to cross the country. They will be electric, and pneumatic, and there will be no smoke problem.

Up above the city, aerial traffic will be heavy. It is here that traffic problems will crop up. But by maintaining altitude levels, traffic will move in single directions only. Landing ramps will be vast circular platforms of solid plastics, amazingly light in weight, and tremendously strong, transparent, so as to cut off very little light.

Each building will have its own aerial landing platform.

Buildings themselves will be constructed on a common plan, with an eye toward beauty and symmetry of the whole city. They will be wider at their bases, tapering up so as to pro vide no ugly and light-destroying shadows within the city.

Regularly spaced will be great buildings that are obviously transportation centers. The most spectacular feature of these tremendous buildings is the perpendicular space ship launching tubes from which cigar shaped vessels lunge soundlessly into the void. The science of this future city is quite advanced, in regard to sound, and noise is eliminated The tremendous roar of a rocket ship is reduced to a whisper by noise baffles which absorb and reflect away the sound in beams that disperse at high altitude.

The new city of London is a miracle of architecture, a symphony of beauty and color and grace, a mecca of peace, quiet and contentment, and a wonder house of science and industry and mechanical coordination. It is Man's Utopia at last.

Starting next month—the first of a new series of back cover paintings by James B. Settles featuring "Transportation on Other Worlds." No. 1. The Airship of Venus.

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swells that broke against the shore in fiery spray.

Far out in the Flaming Ocean rose the three steep black crater-peaks. North's bleared, aching eyes estimated them at least three or four miles away. His heart beat faster as he looked on the westernmost of those three volcanic pinnacles, that held the most fabulous treasure of the System.

Berdeau's voice came, raw with treasure-lust. "The levium's in that west crater. By Heaven, we've got to reach that peak somehow! North, wouldn't it be possible to get there with the ship?"

"Not in a million years!" North retorted emphatically. "No pilot could land on these steep slopes, amid those hellish atmospheric currents."

"Old Laurel said to cross out on a stone raft," muttered the gambler. "But stone won't float on that molten lava, will it?"

North stooped and tossed a chunk of the black basalt out into the hissing flood. It sank from sight.

"This basalt won't float but there must be lighter rock," North said. "We'll have to find some."

They left the basalt ledge and moved over smoking rocks so hot that the lead-soles of their moon-shoes began to soften and bulge. But this rock floated, when they cast a piece into the fiery sea.

"Good!" exclaimed Berdeau. "We'll quarry a big block for a raft—"

"Johnny, *look!*" came Connor's wild warning. "To your right!"

North pitched around, and was stunned by incredulous horror. A half-dozen vague, crouching shapes were approaching them through the smoke.

They were not men, nor did they wear any protective suits. They were monstrous creatures of the infernal moon, advancing to attack.

THE creatures were quadrupeds, and looked something like big baboons. But their bodies had a queer, metallic appearance. And indeed, no flesh of ordinary organic compounds could have existed for more than a minute in that tremendous heat.

The faces in the brutish heads had only two features—a gaping mouth of shining metal teeth, and wide-set, unchanging *crystal* eyes. The rear feet were hard metallic hoofs, but the front feet were massive, gleaming talons. Most terrifying of all, bursting flames issued from the mouths of the creatures at each exhalation.

Here, North knew, was a form of life infinitely far removed from the evolutionary line of ordinary planets. Here strange life that had stirred in metallic salts had developed to a semi-intelligent form. He guessed that the creatures dug raw mineral elements for their nutriment. That their bodies could consume such elements was evidenced by the fact that the chemical process of their tissues was one of continuous combustion.

Connor was shouting wildly. "They must be the Fieries that old Laurel warned about!"

North spun around toward Berdeau and Lenning, standing rooted in amazed horror some yards behind.

"Use your atom-guns!" North yelled. "Those things are going to attack! Mike, get back!"

Berdeau woke from his daze. He and Lenning levelled their heavy atom-pistols at the advancing Fieries and triggered hastily.

The crashing streaks of atomic flame hit the foremost Fieries—and splashed harmlessly off them. The concentrated blasts could no more than scorch those metallic bodies whose very life-process was one of fire.

"My God, atom-guns are no good

against them!" came Lenning's hoarse, horrified cry.

"Back to the ship!" North shouted to the others. "They'll tear us to bits!"

The men turned and pitched through the smoke in the direction of the *Meteor*. But they could not sprint in the heavy moon-shoes which alone made it possible to walk normally in this weak gravity. The Fieries came after them, running with shambling swiftness on four feet.

(North heard a yell of horror from Lenning.) He glanced back and saw that Lenning had stared too long in his petrified amazement, before starting to run. (The Fieries had caught up to him.) Their metallic bodies bore the hulking criminal to the ground.

But Connor too had been slow to retreat. Two of the grotesque creatures were gaining rapidly on the Irishman, North saw in his backward glance.

"Mike, look out!" North yelled frantically to the other, and started back.

The two Fieries overtook Connor as he shouted warning. They leaped upon his back. The powerful talons of one caught in the heavy insulite of his suit and ripped it.

Connor staggered as from sudden agony. "God—" choked his voice.

North had snatched up a loose chunk of basalt as he ran back to aid his comrade. Connor was off his feet, the two Fieries on him.

NORTH hammered madly with his chunk of stone at the two creatures. They recoiled from the furious blows, which apparently could hurt them where the atom-pistols had not.

He seized the opportunity to grab Connor by the belt and stumbled away with him through the smoke. Over on his left, North glimpsed the other four of the creatures clustered around Lenning's prone form, tearing his suit to ribbons. Lenning's body was already scorched and blackened by the terrific heat.

Berdeau was disappearing in the smoke ahead. North followed with frenzied haste, dragging and half-carrying Connor's limp form. The two Fieries had started to pursue him, then had darted to join the others who were tearing at Lenning's suit.

The massive bulk of the *Meteor* loomed out of the smoke. A louder crash of thunder from the distant volcanoes shook North almost from his feet. But he gained the airlock, and then collapsed on the floor as he got through it into the ship.

Berdeau was already stripping off his suit in there, Kells and Darm running alarmedly toward him with atom-guns ready for action.

"They got Lenning," Berdeau was saying, his white face beaded with sweat, his voice hoarse. "They tore his suit to bits—"

Whitey and Dorak were running forward to North. "Johnny, are you all right?" cried the one-armed giant.

North gasped for breath as he got the helmet off his head. "Help—Mike!" he panted. "They punctured his suit—the heat got through—"

Dorak and Philip Sidney were already getting off Connor's helmet and suit. The Irishman lay, his battered face flushed dull, unnatural red, his breath coming in choking gurgles.

Nova Smith's small figure came flying to North's side. "Sailor, here's the medicine kit! His back is burned—"

Connor's back was more than burned—it was crisped black by the terrific heat that had entered through his punctured suit. North's heart stood still as he saw. The Irishman groaned a little under their touch.

Connor's eyes opened, moved with an effort over the white faces of those gath-

ered over him. Words dribbled huskily from his mouth.

"No use, Johnny," he whispered. "I'm—done for. Getting cold—"

His eyes half-closed. "I'd—like a drink—"

It was Nova Smith who flew for the brandy bottle, and steadied it at his lips. Connor's hand dropped to the star-girl's shoulder. The ghost of his old grin hovered for a moment on his face.

"Way I always wanted to die," he whispered. "Holding a pretty girl and a bottle—"

The last word was a trailing sigh, as his mouth went slack and his eyes closed and his head rolled back.

ALINE LAUREL burst into sobs. Philip Sidney soothed her, his own face white and strained.

Nova looked at John North, winking back the tears in her blue eyes. "I know how you must feel, sailor—"

But North said nothing, only looking sickly at Whitey and Dorak and at Steenie who was watching with puzzled wonder from a little distance.

Scrabble of something against the outer hull of the ship broke the silence. A terrified cry came from Aline as they saw outside the windows the grotesque gray forms of a score of Fieries who were clawing at the ship with their talons in brutish wonder.

The man Kells exclaimed hoarsely, "Good God, they're devils!"

Berdeau's sharp voice silenced him. "They're only the Fieries that old Laurel warned of. They're immune to atom-guns, but we've got to get rid of them somehow."

"If I turned on the cycs and gave them a blast out of the lateral rocket-tubes—," Philip Sidney suggested.

The gambler nodded. "Do that. Kells, go along with him."

In a few moments, came the staccato crash of the rockets. The brief spurt of flame from the side tubes of the ship sent the scrabbling Fieries recoiling hastily. They beat a hasty retreat through the smoke.

In dead silence, North and Whitey and Dorak wrapped Connor's body. Wearing the insulite suits, they took it outside for burial. Kells and Darm went along with their atom-guns grimly ready.

They raised a cairn of rocks over their dead comrade, some little distance from the ship. Then in unbroken silence they plodded back through the smoke to the *Meteor*.

Steenie looked at North puzzledly as he took off his helmet. "Isn't Mike coming back, Johnny?" asked the space-struck pilot.

"No, Steenie," North said dully. "Mike isn't coming back."

Aline broke into tears. "Let's get away from this terrible world before others die!" she sobbed. "It took my father's life—it's taken scores of others—"

"We don't leave here until we get that levium!"

Charles Berdeau's voice rang like steel, his atom-pistol cradled grimly in his hand as he stood sweeping them with masterful black eyes.

"There's a billion dollars worth of levium over in that crater in the Flaming Ocean," the gambler bit out. "I'm not quitting when a pot like that is within my reach."

North said in a slow, bitter voice, "Connor wouldn't have been killed if you hadn't had him come out with us, Berdeau."

"He was set to make trouble—I didn't dare leave him here in the ship," rapped Berdeau, his face taut. "There'll be no more trouble, unless you try to buck my orders."

Whitey's massive form was stiff with

rage, his face flaring. But again North warned the one-armed giant with a glance to wait. Three atom-pistols would scythe down not only them but the two girls, if they brought things to a head here. North still fiercely clung to his precarious scheme.

"We're going after that levium now!" Berdeau was snapping. "We're *all* going—all except the girls and that space-struck idiot. I'm leaving no one here who could take the ship and blast off and leave me marooned on this damned world."

"But if something happens to all of us out there, the girls will be unable to leave—will face slow death here!" protested Philip Sidney.

"That," rasped Berdeau, "will make you careful to see that nothing does happen. Get into your suits. We'll take along picks, bars and cables. We should be strong enough to beat back the Fieries if they attack again."

NORTH slowly started to put his insulite suit and helmet back on, and Sidney and Whitey Jones and Dorak followed his example.

"I want to go with you, sailor," announced Nova unexpectedly, to North. Her pert face was pale and anxious. "I could help you—"

North shook his head. "You've got to stay here with Aline and Steenie, Nova. We'll be back. Don't you worry about that."

They all had their suits on. Berdeau motioned them grimly to the airlock. He and his two criminals kept them covered, forcing them to lead the way outside.

Out there in the thunder-riven smoke, North looked swiftly around. There was no sign of the Fieries who had attacked them before. But he and his two old comrades and Sidney gripped their steelite picks more tightly as they started forward a good distance ahead of Berdeau's group.

The basalt plateau shuddered beneath their feet with each crashing detonation that reverberated through the smoke. Clouds of ashes continued to rattle off their helmets. They moved obliquely toward the right, leaving the basalt ledge as they approached the shore of the molten lava sea.

Berdeau, standing guard with his two men at a little distance, indicated a great flat mass of the lighter black rock at the shore of the lava ocean.

"That will float on the lava and it'll make a big enough raft to hold all of us," the iron-willed gambler declared. "North, you and Jones and Dorak start cutting it loose. Sidney, you cut some stone paddles."

They bent to the work, splitting the flat mass of rock away with their picks and bars, and then slowly prying it toward the crimson, hissing flood of lava a few feet away. Only the lower gravity of the moon made the task possible, and even so they had to strain every muscle.

"Fieries coming!" yelled Kells' voice suddenly, hoarse with panic.

A full dozen of the crouching, fire-breathing quadrupeds were shambling toward them from the east.

"Some of you drive them back with your picks!" Berdeau yelled. "The rest launch that raft!"

North and Dorak and Whitey met the rush of the charging Fieries with flailing picks and bars. North's pick shattered the crystal eyes or sense-organs of one of the creatures that charged him. The creature groped blindly for him with furious talons.

Whitey had almost decapitated another of the metallic-bodied monsters with a whirling blow from his heavy bar. The Fieries recoiled from the fierce defense, for the moment.

"Onto the raft!" shouted Berdeau. "Quick, before they rush again!"

Sidney and the criminal Kells had got the massive slab of black rock launched on the molten lava. Berdeau already stood on it, as it floated on the hissing flood, his pistol commanding the situation.

North and his two comrades leaped out after the others, landing on the rocking raft of stone. The man Darm leaped wildly after them.

"Paddle—quick!" Berdeau was yelling.

The Fieries were rushing toward the shore. The ponderous floating mass of stone slowly forged out onto the lava flood as North and his friends seized the stone paddles Sidney had cut, and worked them furiously.

The balked creatures bunched on the shore, glaring after them with the saucer-like crystalline eyes. Berdeau, standing with Darm and Kells on the front of the strange raft, pointed northward across the flaming sea.

"Keep her headed toward those three crater-peaks!"

NORTH almost admired the indomitable resolution of the gambler in that moment. Their situation was perilous in the extreme. A sliding current of the thick lava had seized the raft and threatened to carry it westward.

The heat that glared up from the crimson-glowing lava was almost overpowering, even through the protective nimbus of their anti-heaters and their thick suits. Each stroke of the stone paddles sent up showers of fiery spray behind them.

Yet the rude stone raft forged on northward over the flaming sea. The three steep crater-peaks loomed larger ahead. But they seemed only creeping across that two-mile expanse.

Ashes continued to rattle down upon them from the range of volcanoes spouting tempests of fire in the far south. Clouds of smoke whirled down and enveloped them in a lurid darkness for moments. Around them and over them, threatening sometimes to tear them from the raft, screamed the ferocious atmospheric currents that rushed above the fiery sea.

"This—is hell itself," choked Philip Sidney, laboring with his paddle beside North. "We'll never get back with the levium over this!"

Fierce storms of changing flames danced here and there on the surface of the lava flood. One such typhoon of fire glided toward them.

"Paddle to the west!" North yelled warningly. "Get out of the way of that fire-storm!"

They hastily veered their course. And the tempest of bursting flames roared but a few dozen yards from them, passing southward.

Long, grinding detonations of diastrophism deep within the volcanic moon were followed by heaving waves of lava on which the raft rocked precariously. Yet they were getting closer now to the three craters.

North dug his stone paddle again, and again, and again, bending his head to the task. When he once more looked up, the westernmost of the three craters loomed full ahead.

It was not an active volcano, though it looked as though it had been so not long ago. It was a jagged black conical peak, rising sheer from the Flaming Ocean without any ledge or shelf along its base big enough for a space-ship to land. But there was one narrow shelf toward which they directed the stone raft, upon which men might leap ashore.

The stone raft bumped the shore. Berdeau and his two criminals were first ashore on the ledge, at once moving a safe distance of thirty feet away

to cover the activities of the others with their weapons.

"Bring those picks and bars and cables with you!" Berdeau was ordering harshly. "We'll moor the raft here with one of the cables."

Whitey and Sidney and Dorak stepped ashore with the tools. But North, as he stepped across the rude rock raft, stooped as though he had stumbled. His hands surreptitiously loosened the fastenings of his moon-shoes.

The time to essay his desperate stratagem had come. He knew he would be given but one chance.

He straightened, as though to shuffle on off the raft. But instead, his feet kicked off his leaden moon-shoes. And he bunched and sprang for Berdeau and the other two criminals.

The three were thirty feet away. But thirty feet through the air like a human projectile shot John North's figure, now that he had rid himself of the moon-shoes that had held him down against the weak gravity.

He heard Berdeau's gasping shout. "You *fool*—"

The crashing blast of the gambler's atom-pistol streaked toward North at the same instant. But he was moving too fast for the aim to be accurate. It grazed past his helmet the moment before he struck Berdeau.

He bore the gambler to the ground, fiercely gripping his gunhand and at the same time thrusting his legs to trip Kells and Darm.

"Dorak! Sidney! Jump them—*now!*" he yelled.

CHAPTER IX

In the Crater

NORTH heard the crash of an atom-gun close by as he struggled fiercely with Berdeau. Yells and a gasping gurgle of agony came to him on the space-suit phone but he could not turn now to see who was hit.

Berdeau was fighting like a demon. North had twisted his arm until he dropped the atom-pistol, but the gambler was struggling to scrabble it up again and he was on the point of succeeding.

North desperately put all his strength into a convulsive effort that sent Berdeau staggering backward. In the moment that followed, North snatched up the fallen atom-pistol and levelled it at the gambler.

"Stand back and keep your hands up or I'll blast you, Berdeau!" he cried.

The fight upon the narrow ledge was over. But that fierce, brief explosion of conflict had taken its toll.

The criminal Darm lay prone and unmoving, the glassite eye-slit of his helmet smashed and his face withering black from the heat. Whitey's giant form was straightening from the dead man.

Sidney had got Kells' pistol and was covering the other criminal. But Jan Dorak lay behind them, gripping his leg and gasping in agony.

"Darm got Dorak before I killed him," panted Whitey to North.

North let the other two cover Berdeau and Kells, while he stooped to Dorak's side. The stolid space-man's leg had been hit by the crashing atom-blast, and his insulite suit had been torn through.

His face was contorted with agony inside his helmet, and he spoke to North through pain-clenched teeth.

"My leg—burning up," he gasped. "But I'm not hurt bad—".

North cut a square of insulite from the suit of the dead Darm and bound it tightly around Dorak's leg. It would

keep the terrific heat from entering Dorak's suit for the time being.

Then they cut lengths from one of the steelite cables and bound the hands and feet of Berdeau and Kells. The gambler's eyes raged at North from inside his helmet's eye-slit as they finished.

North found himself shaking from reaction. He had hardly dared hope that his stratagem of attack would actually succeed.

"I didn't dare try that stunt before," he said hoarsely to Whitey and Sidney. "For always before, Berdeau had someone covering Aline and the first sign of attack would have meant her death."

"It was good work, Johnny," Whitey said warmly. "I was beginning to think you'd never act."

North looked up the steep slope of the crater-peak at whose base they stood. The towering cone-shaped pinnacle was crusted over with solidified lava from past eruptions. There was a practicable path up its side that North's searching eyes traced out swiftly.

"Now for the levium," he said tautly. "Then we can get back to the *Meteor* and get away from this hellish moon."

He turned to Dorak, who lay back against the side of the ledge watching them with pain-narrowed eyes.

"Go ahead, fellows," muttered Dorak. "I can watch Berdeau and Kells while you're gone."

North gave him one of the atom-pistols. "Blast them if they try to move, Jan," he said.

But there seemed small possibility of Berdeau or Kells attempting escape, since they lay bound hand and foot upon the narrow ledge. Berdeau had not uttered a word since this sudden reversal of fortune. The gambler was taking it with the cool imperturbability that characterized him.

THEY moored their stone raft to the ledge with one of the cables. And then, carrying the rest of the cables and most of the picks and bars, they started up the side of the towering cone.

North led the way, seeking to follow the tentative path his eyes had marked out up the lava ledges and cracks of the mighty crater. But it was a narrow, dangerous trail—made more precarious by the continual rumbling convulsions of Thunder Moon which shook the whole crater-peak.

Black clouds of smoke swooped down on them like giant bats, to shroud them in momentary darkness. The screaming atmospheric currents seemed stronger up here than below, and threatened to tear them bodily from their precarious footholds. Hundreds of feet beneath them smoldered the crimson, molten expanse of the Flaming Ocean.

North's mind had concentrated fiercely upon the levium. That half-legendary deposit of the most mysterious of elements must be found, or all that they had paid in pain and hardship and lives would have been for nothing. If old Thorn Laurel, years ago, had actually come this dreadful way and found the levium, it must still be here.

They reached the truncated summit of the peak, and crouched flat for a few moments lest the ferocious currents that raged up here should tear them off the rock. They found themselves clinging to the jagged rim of the crater itself.

"Do we have to go down into *that?*" Philip Sidney was asking a little dazedly, having raised his head to peer down into the crater.

"Laurel's directions said the levium was *in* this crater," North answered. "He must have found a way down into it."

The crater pit was a roughly vertical

shaft more than a hundred feet across, dropping into black, lightless depths. The walls of this volcanic tube, like the slopes of the peak outside, were crusted with ledges and ridges of frozen lava, and red living lava glowed at its bottom.

"I see a way down the northern wall of the pit," Whitey exclaimed. "But it looks risky."

"It must be the way Laurel went down, for it's the only possible one," North said. "Come on."

They went around to the north side of the crater, crouching low against the screaming currents of smoke. Once they had started down into the crater-tube, they escaped the main force of the atmospheric currents. But the shuddering of the crater to each rumbling crash of thunder was more dangerous here.

For this trail down into the interior of the crater was more precarious even than the one outside. They had to grope their way from ledge to ledge, conscious that a slip would mean a tumble into the living lava that glowed redly at the far bottom of the shaft.

Then John North glimpsed a little below them a faint glow of *blue* light from an aperture in the crater wall. His heart bounded.

"I think we've found it!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "Come on!"

THEY dropped onto a shelving ledge, from the side of which the aperture opened into the crater's mass. The opening was man-high.

North entered it, passing into a small cavern that was one of the many bubble-like spaces honeycombing the crater. But this little space inside the rock glowed with a weird, frosty blue brilliance. The light came from the roof of the cave. They all three looked upward.

"It's the levium!" Whitey yelled. "But Johnny, look at the *size* of it—"

Sidney's voice was quivering. "It can't be real. There can't be that much levium anywhere."

North's heart was pounding with excitement that was mingled with a strange feeling of awe as he looked up at that wonder of the fiery moon.

Seemingly suspended just under the vaulted rock roof of the little cave, hung an irregular ovoid of dense, stony matter that glowed from every atom with that pure, frosty blue brilliance. Its mass was almost seven feet along its greatest length, and nearly that wide and thick.

It was like a shining blue sun, hanging there at the cavern roof. But it was not really hanging there, North knew. That stupendous mass of levium was really pressing *upward* against the roof, seeking vainly to escape from this pocket in which it had long been trapped.

North could guess the geologic history of this levium mass. Caught inside the fiery mass of Oberon when the moon began to solidify, the levium had through the ages pressed upward and upward, seeking to fly off into space with all the peculiar reversed gravitation that it alone possessed, yet trapped here in this cave for perhaps many ages.

"Now we know why Thorn Laurel brought back only a scrap of the levium," North said hoarsely. "No one man could handle this mass."

Sidney reached upward with his steelite bar and chipped a small fragment of the shining levium loose. He grasped it in his hand and pulled it down.

It struggled in the young Company officer's hand, to fall upward. And when he released it, it shot up and smacked against the roof.

"Unbelievable," he muttered, dazedly. "No wonder the stuff is so supervaluable. It alone among the elements

can defy gravitation."

"Johnny, how are we going to get the stuff out of here?" Whitey asked tautly. "We can't simply carry it—it would tend to fall upward every minute. We couldn't hold it."

"There's only one possible way to get it out," North sweated. "We'll have to lash it to a mass of ordinary rock heavy enough to counterbalance the levium's minus weight."

They found such a mass of rock in one corner of the little cave—a great chunk that had been shaken from the wall by the continuous rumbling convulsions of Thunder Moon.

Standing upon it, they pried at the hanging levium mass with their steelite bars, seeking to get the cables around it and draw it down. But as they started to haul the levium downward, chunks of rock began falling from the cavern roof against which it had been pressing.

"Johnny, the whole roof may come down on us!" Whitey exclaimed.

North realized the peril. The mass of levium, pressing upward for ages, had strained and split the cavern roof. If they removed the levium now, the one support of the roof would be gone, and the continuous quakes of Thunder Moon would soon shake down the whole cave upon them.

"We've got to get the stuff out of here quickly!" North declared. "Hurry and lash it to the rock."

IT TOOK the strength of all three of them to haul the levium down from the roof by the cables they had passed around it. As they hastily lashed it to the mass of black rock, more chunks fell from above.

Lashed to the rock, the reversed weight of the levium was more than counterbalanced. The whole bound mass of levium and rock together had only a few pounds of positive weight.

"The next strong quake will bring the whole cave down now!" North cried warningly. "Hurry and get out of here!"

"Not yet!" rasped a familiar, harsh voice.

They spun around. Charles Berdeau's tall, insulite-clad figure stood in the entrance of the cave, with an atom-pistol levelled upon them.

Berdeau came swiftly into the little cavern, and they could glimpse the figure of Kells on the ledge outside. And Berdeau's black eyes were flaring with triumph inside his helmet as he covered the petrified three.

"I still hold a hand in this game," North!" the gambler snapped. "You didn't stop to think that your friend Dorak might pass out from pain and give Kells and me a chance to work free, did you?"

North knew that Berdeau was going to kill them and that neither he nor Sidney could get out their own weapons in time to prevent it.

But for just a moment, Berdeau's fingers lingered on the trigger as the gambler glanced exultantly at the incredible, shining mass of levium.

"The treasure of Thunder Moon!" he whispered, trembling with avidity. "The biggest pot of all—"

Rumbling reverberation of another shuddering quake shook them at that moment. And from the split roof fell a shower of rocky chunks that smashed down on Berdeau's outstretched arm and pistol and sent the gambler reeling wildly back.

"The whole cave is coming down!" Whitey Jones yelled wildly. "Out of here!"

They grabbed the big bound mass of levium and rock and dragged it furiously toward the entrance of the cave. The unarmed criminal Kells who had

been on the ledge outside had fled.

Berdeau had got to his feet, was trying drunkenly to find his atom-gun, as North and Sidney struggled convulsively to drag the levium mass through the narrow opening. But with a crashing roar, the whole roof of the cave gave way and poured down on the gambler in a stony shower.

The archway of the aperture was settling, the opening collapsing upon North and Sidney. But Whitey sprang into that closing opening, his giant form bracing with herculean effort to hold up the settling rock masses with his great back and shoulders.

It gave North and Sidney the moment in which to thrust the levium-and-rock mass outside, onto the ledge. But when North turned, Whitey's giant shoulders were buckling under the weight of collapsing rock, and his voice came to them as a gasping groan.

"Johnny—"

North would never forget the love and despair that shone in Whitey's eyes as his great head bowed beneath the crushing weight.

Even as North sprang wildly back to haul the giant clear, he was shaken from his feet by the ultimate crash of collapsing rock as the whole cave crumpled in upon itself.

He staggered up on his knees and there was no more cave or opening, and there was only a great mass of new-fallen rock slabs where Whitey had stood. He beat with clenched fists on the rock, and his voice was strangled.

"Whitey! Whitey!"

But he knew that Whitey was dead, and buried like Berdeau beneath tons of rock that he had held back for that last moment of their escape.

SIDNEY'S shaking, urgent voice penetrated through North's agony of grief. The young officer was clinging to the levium mass as they crouched on the shuddering ledge of the crater-pit wall.

"Kells got away!" Sidney was shouting. "He fled back up the trail—he didn't have any weapon but he'll use our raft to escape if we don't stop him."

North felt dazed and unreal, yet even so he roused himself to action.

"You bring the levium!" he said hoarsely to Sidney. "I'll go after him."

He clawed his way back up to the crater-shaft's summit, and every moment of the way there was only one thought ringing in his stunned mind. Whitey was dead—Whitey was dead.

When he came out onto the summit of the crater, North saw Kells' insulite-suited figure scrambling frantically down the slope of the peak. He flung himself fiercely in pursuit, heedless now of all risks.

But Kells, looking fearfully back at him, increased his frenzied speed. The criminal had already reached the ledge on the shore of the Flaming Ocean,and was untying the stone raft there and shoving it convulsively out onto the burning lava flood.

North drew his atom-gun and shot, but Kells dodged fearfully back and escaped the crashing bolt. The stone raft was floating further out onto the flaming sea. Desperately, Kells ran and leaped for it—

He leaped short, in his heavy moon-shoes. North saw the criminal hit the molten lava and heard a ghastly scream mercifully choked off in his space-suit phone. When he sickly looked again, there was no sign of Kells in the lava flood. The dark stone raft was floating serenely away.

North went back to the summit, and helped Sidney drag the unwieldy mass of levium and stone down to the ledge at the crater's base. Then they bent over Dorak's still form.

Dorak lay still unconscious, but he was breathing.

"He'll live if we can get him out of here," Sidney said. "But how, North? The raft's gone—"

Dully, North roused himself again. "We may be able to cut another raft from the rock of the crater," he muttered. "But I'm afraid it's too heavy a stone to float."

They made a trial, chipping loose a block of the basic rock of the crater and tossing it into the flaming sea. It sank slowly under the hissing crimson flood.

"I thought so," North said heavily. "We're marooned here. We can't possibly get away, for that's the only kind of rock there is here."

Sidney cried out. "But even if we are finished, what about Aline, and Nova, and Steenie? They're over there in the ship—they won't be able to get away from this moon either. The girls aren't pilots. And if they tried by themselves to make another stone raft and come out for us, the Fieries would surely overwhelm them."

North thought. "They've only got one chance to get away," he said finally. "That's Steenie. If he could pilot the ship off this moon—"

"But he's space-struck!" Sidney exclaimed. "My God, North, a man like that can't pilot a ship!"

"He used to be a great pilot, years ago," North muttered. "His mind, dimmed as it is, may remember a little. It's their only chance to get away."

North spent some minutes attaching Sidney's space-suit phone battery to his own instrument. The redoubled power might enable the short-radius instrument to reach the *Meteor*.

He spoke urgently. "John North calling the *Meteor!*"

THERE came no answer. He called, over and over again. "They'll surely think to listen for possible messages when we don't come back," he said desperately.

But it was almost an hour before a wildly excited girl's voice rang suddenly in his ears.

"Sailor, is that you? This is Nova! I was worried and tried turning on the audiophone, and—"

"Nova, listen! We've got the levium but we can't get away from here." North told her rapidly what had happened. "You have got to get away from this moon in the ship, and get to Titania for help. It's the only way you can get us out of this."

"But we can't do that!" Nova cried. "You can't live out there for the days it would take for us to go and come back with help!"

"Of course we can live here that long," North lied. "We found a cache of supplies here that old Thorn Laurel left—oxygen tanks, food, water and a portable heat-tight shelter. When you come back with help, you'll find us here with the levium."

Nova finally agreed. "If you're sure that's the best way we can help you, sailor, we'll do it. Only—how can we get away to Titania? Neither Aline nor I can pilot a ship."

"I know, but Steenie maybe can," North said. "I want you to let me talk to Steenie."

He waited while Nova went for the space-struck man. And he saw Philip Sidney smiling strangely at him.

"That was a good lie you told, North," Sidney said in a low voice. "If you hadn't told that, they'd never have agreed to leave."

North nodded. "They'll come back with help, if they get safely away. We'll be dead—but the levium will be here, to be used as we planned."

He broke off as he heard the click of the audiophone in the *Meteor* being

turned on again. Then came Steenie's doubtful voice.

"Steenie, listen — this is Johnny," North said, speaking slowly and clearly to reach that dimmed mind. "Steenie, you want to pilot the ship, don't you?"

"Yes, Johnny!" came the eager answer. "Will you let me pilot it now?"

"Do you think you can, Steenie?" North asked tensely. "It's been years since you were at the controls of any ship, you know. Do you think you remember enough?"

"I think I will remember it all when I get my hands on the space-stick, Johnny!"

"Then listen, Steenie," sweated North. "Here's what you must do. You must take the ship straight up away from this moon. You must head for Titania, and land at the spaceport of Moontown."

Steenie's voice came in a puzzled, halting question. "But what about you and the others, Johnny? You're not going to stay on this place, are you? It isn't a good place to stay."

"I know, but we've got to stay here," North explained. "We can't get away from this peak. You have to go for help."

"But I can come out for you in the ship!" Steenie proposed eagerly. "I can come and get you and then we'll all go away from here together."

"No, Steenie!" North's voice rang urgently. "You mustn't try that! There's no place here where the ship can land."

"But I could make a suspension-landing long enough to let you get in the ship," the space-struck pilot declared in his clear, childish voice.

"You mustn't try it, Steenie! The atmospheric currents are hellish here—no pilot could make a suspension-landing here without crashing! You've got to do as I say and take off from this moon—"

NORTH paused but there was no answer. He yelled frantically into the transmitter in his helmet. "Steenie, listen to me! Don't try that or you'll kill yourself and the girls too—"

"North, *look!"* Philip Sidney's stabbing cry made North raise his eyes swiftly.

Out there to the south across the flaming lava sea, something was rising through the smoke. It was the big, long bulk of the *Meteor,* ascending on the fiery blast of its keel tubes.

Its tail tubes jetted and it came rushing out low above the surging molten lava, toward them. Its low altitude and high speed seemed carrying it toward a headlong crash against the crater.

"Steenie, go back!" North screamed vainly into his transmitter.

It was too late. The massive bulk of the battered *Meteor* was rushing down toward the narrow ledge on which they crouched.

Staccato thunder of its roaring rocket-tubes drowned out even the rumbling roar of the quaking moon. The ship was dropping beside them, dropping to destruction in the flaming lava—

Its keel-tubes jetted blinding gush of fire downward, jets that spumed the lava beneath to fiery spray. And, poised precariously upon those flaming columns and lurching and rocking to the wild currents that screamed about them, the ship hovered in the suspension-landing.

"This way, North!" Sidney was yelling wildly.

The airlock door of the hovering ship was but a few feet in front of them. They plunged toward it, dragging the ponderous levium and rock mass and thrusting it into the ship.

It seemed madness to think that any

pilot in the universe could hold a suspension-landing, most superhumanly difficult of all piloting feats, for these precious seconds in the screaming smoke-currents. But Steenie was holding it there! Playing the keel and lateral tubes like an organ of fire, holding and balancing the ship—

North found himself in the airlock with Sidney and the levium mass. He clawed the outer door shut, tore open the inner door and yelled hoarsely,

"Up, Steenie—*up!*"

He was flung headlong as the *Meteor* roared upward through the raging smoke as though flung by a giant catapult. Up and up, out through the swirling smoke and ashes of Thunder Moon, out toward clear space and the friendly stars.

Nova and Aline were beside North, helping him up, sobbing from relief and emotion. But he went past them, he staggered to the control-room where Steenie crouched with the space-stick held far back.

Steenie's face was blazing, transfigured, for this brief moment—all the flaming genius of his great past living for these few seconds in his brain once more as he sent the *Meteor* roaring out and out into the void.

And then the ship was droning through clear space under the great, mild green eye of Uranus, and Thunder Moon was a sullen crimson sphere falling astern, and Steenie's face became mild and childlike as always.

He looked anxiously up at North. "Did I do it all right, Johnny?" he asked anxiously. "Did I?"

North's hand was shaking as he laid it on the other's shoulder. "You did what no other pilot in the System could have done, Steenie."

Steenie smiled, the pleased smile of a happy child.

"I was a good pilot, once," he said.

CHAPTER X

The Monument

CREAKING in every beam as though tired from its long journey, the *Meteor* sank toward the night side of Earth. Upon the moonlit convexity below, the lights of New York were a brilliant blaze. Around the black blot of the spaceport glowed the friendly red and green beacons.

North brought the ship down slowly. And when it had landed, and the drone of the cycs was replaced by a new silence that seemed very heavy, he sat for a moment motionless in the pilot-chair before he unstrapped. Then, shoulders sagging, he went back to the cabin.

Sidney had opened the door, and the men who had been waiting with a stretcher and rocket-car had come in. They were putting Dorak on the stretcher. The space-man's leg had been treated at Titania, and hospital care would save it for him though he would be crippled for life.

Dorak looked up at North past the others, and his pallid face was queerly intent. "Johnny—"

"We'll talk later, Jan," North said quietly. "You go along with them now and rest. And Steenie, I want you to go too—to help take care of Jan."

Steenie brightened. "I'll take care of him. But you'll come later, Johnny?"

"I'll come later."

They went out, and Aline's fine eyes dimmed as she looked after them. Her voice was husky as she turned to North.

"They, and all the other old spacemen like them—they'll never want for anything again," she said huskily. "Half the levium goes to them as we planned. And it isn't enough."

Sidney told North earnestly, "I didn't have a chance to talk to you on the

way in, North. But I wanted to tell you —there'll be no trouble with the Company. I'm resigning there, and I'll testify that Aline had actually bought this ship. They'll have no case at all."

North nodded his thanks. "What about the levium? Have you made any arrangements?"

Aline nodded eagerly. "Philip sent a message from Titania. Men will be here to take the levium to safekeeping. I think they're here now."

It was indeed the armed guards and armored rocket-truck that had come for the treasure. With curious lack of emotion, North watched them load it into the truck.

Sidney came back to him as he stood there in the moonlight outside the ship. The young officer's clean-cut face was uncertain.

"North, there's something else I didn't have a chance to tell you. Aline and I—"

North smiled faintly and nodded. "I know, Sidney. It was clear enough all the way back that you two love each other."

Sidney seemed distressed. "I guess I was afraid to tell you. I thought maybe you and Aline—maybe you —"

North shook his head tiredly. "It wasn't ever like that, Sidney. Aline is fine and dear, and she gave us the chance to go to space again and do something for our old comrades. And I think she's fond of me as one of her father's old friends. But that's all there ever was to it."

Sidney's face showed his earnest relief, as he turned. Aline and Nova Smith had come up.

The small blonde star-girl held out her hand to North. Her voice was light. "Goodbye, sailor—and thanks for the lift back to Earth."

"Why, Nova, we all ought to be thanking you," North told her. "If it hadn't been for you—"

"Oh, forget it," she replied with a shrug. "A star-girl's always running into trouble. I was just trying to get out of it myself."

She turned almost brusquely away before North could say more. Aline was speaking eagerly. "Philip and I —all of us—we're going to go together. Come on."

BUT John North hung back. "You go on ahead. There's something I've got to do here—about the ship —"

Doubtfully, they turned away. And North was left standing alone in the moonlight by the battered side of the silent *Meteor*.

He started walking slowly across the spaceport, toward the soaring moonlit shaft of the Monument to the Space Pioneers. A strong wind was blowing gustily through the night, and it brought him the sounds of a Venus liner being readied for take-off, and the music and laughing voices of the passengers holding bon voyage celebration in the nearby Spaceport Cafe.

But North only half heard these things as he walked with dragging steps toward the monument. He did not know why he had come here, as he stood looking up at the soaring shaft. He felt only a dim ache somehow to feel less alone.

He remembered the day they had landed here on their return with Carew from the second voyage. He remembered the cheering crowds, the bright sunlight, Mike Connor grinning and joking, Whitey's tall young figure over them all—

North bent forward and tried to read the names lettered in bronze on the pedestal, the names of those who had sailed with Johnson and Carew and Wenzi. His own name was there but he was not seeking that. He was look-

ing beneath the immortal names of the great leaders, and name after name in those lists brought phantoms to stand beside him in the windy night.

Jason Peters . . .

"—ain't nobody goin' to keep me from goin' to space again once more!"

Michael Connor . . .

"—always wanted to die this way, holding a pretty girl and a bottle."

Harley Steen . . .

"I was a good pilot, wasn't I?"

Whiteman Jones . . .

"Johnny—"

He could read no more. His throat was an aching tightness, and something blurred his eyes. They were singing now over in the Spaceport Cafe but the sound seemed to come from a great distance.

A small hand grasped his sleeve.

"Sailor!"

He looked down at Nova's face, white and strained in the moonlight.

"Sailor, I *couldn't* leave you—I knew you'd be coming here," she was saying huskily.

THE wind brought the distant song clear to their ears. It was the old song that had lived on to become the popular refrain of these days of otherworld travel.

"We'll build a stairway to the stars—"

North gestured toward the gleaming names upon the pedestal, and his voice was choking.

"They built a stairway to the stars, Nova. And now they're gone—they're gone and forgotten—"

"Sailor, don't!" Nova was crying, clinging to him. "I know how you feel, but you're not alone. You'll always have me, sailor, if you want me—if you just want me—"

"Why, Nova—." He looked down at her tear-stained face, wonderingly.

"I know I'm only a star-girl—," she began.

"You're the bravest, finest girl I ever met," he told her. "Any man would want you. But I'm old—"

She buried her head against his shoulder, without replying. And North felt strange warmth melt that frozen tightness in his chest.

He held her so, in the moonlight. Held her, while the Venus liner rose with ponderous thunder of rockets, streaking a towering column of fire toward the zenith, dwarfing the stone shaft beside him by the fiery splendor of its greater and more enduring monument.

THE END

SKIRTS — CIGARS — BUTTER BUSINESS BAROMETERS

THE guys that keep track of those things in Washington have found some new crazy relationships in the world of facts and figures. Economists in the Department of Agriculture have recently discovered that the rate we consume butter, cigars, ice cream, and skirt material has a lot to do with how good business is.

Queerly enough, during the last depression the consumption of ice cream went so low it almost fell off the chart. Now it's so high it has almost run off the top of the chart. When business is bad the consumption of butter decreases. Now butter is enjoying its hey-day.

The more smoke that pours from factory chimneys is an indication of how much smoke pours from human chimneys. We smoke cigars and cigarettes in direct proportion to the amount of smoke coming from factories.

In the case of women's skirts it has been found that during prosperous years they are very short and during depression years they are quite long. Some recall how short women's skirts were during the roaring twenties, and how long they became during the midst of the depression thirties. Now look at 'em! They're reaching the danger zone; and if business keeps getting better and better, the skirt manufacturers will have to start retooling for the super-scanty-skirt year of 1943!

MARS—Planet of War

by WILLY LEY

How do the planets really look? Here is a scientific and authoritative picture of the landscape of Mars

NO. I

WHILE three-fourths of the Earth's surface is covered by water and only one-quarter of it is dry land, the proportion is the almost exact reverse on Mars. This statement assumes, of course, that the dark spots we see in our telescopes actually are seas. It may be that even some of the dark territories are only lowlands and many astronomers agree that only the Mare Australe (Southern Ocean) is really water, but only a few inches deep.

Thus Mars is a world where deserts play an important rôle but while the term "desert" on Earth suggests heat, these Martian deserts are cold, their normal temperature being somewhere between zero Fahrenheit and zero Centrigrade. The highest temperature ever measured, during Martian summer, is about equal to a cool day in spring on Earth.

Due to the thin air, the sky of Mars is always dark, and there is reason to believe that its color contains more green than blue. The two moons are so tiny that they, although close to the planet, can be distinguished from other stars only by very sharp eyes.

One of the mysteries of Mars is why ancient astrologers selected the fourth planet of our solar system to be the symbol of Mars, God of War. At first glance it seems fairly obvious, the reddish color of the planet may have been reminiscent of burning villages and blood—of what war means to men driven from their homes.

But that reddish glow might just as easily have been interpreted as the flame of a gigantic shining ruby or other red stone or, if fire it must be, as the warming benevolent flame over which food is prepared. And if Mars had been "explained" as a red jewel in the heavens the planet might well have become the lover's star, or, to use a mythological name, the star of Aphrodite or Venus.

Anyway, Mars did receive the name of the god of war. And whoever talked about that planet took pains to cling to this reputation. Babylonian priests said that it was Mars who judged the dead, the Romans were afraid of the Plague if Mars was very bright. And among the Arabian tribes there existed a special sect that worshipped the red planet. Their priests met for sacrifice on a Tuesday, which is the day of Mars (In French Tuesday is called *mardi*, from Latin *Martis Dies*, translated: Day of Mars), draped with blood-spattered garments and carrying blood-stained weapons. The victim was a red-

MARS AS THE EXPERT DRAWS IT
The above drawing was made by G. F. Morrell, F.R.A.S., F.R.G.S., and is reproduced by courtesy of the *Illustrated London News.*

haired man who was drowned in oil and it was believed that the corpse would be able to foretell the future one year after death.

Mars had certainly a bad reputation which was obeyed—although of course not seriously—as late as 1877 when Asaph Hall discovered the two small moons of Mars and named them Phobos and Deimos, Fear and Terror, the constant companions of war.

IT IS not as widely known as it deserves to be that Mars was the first planet of which a primitive map was drawn.

Galileo Galilei, eagerly exploring the heavens with his newly built telescope, had naturally looked at Mars too. But there was nothing of interest for him to see, "no markings on the surface of Mars" he had reported.

But soon after Galilei's compatriot, Fontana, thought that he did see something, and in 1636, he drew a picture of Mars showing a dark spot in the center surrounded by a shaded ring. This, of course, was only an optical il-

lusion as has been proved by modern astronomers in using telescopes of that time that are preserved in museums.

But even before Fontana surprised the astronomical world with his drawing, the red planet had rendered invaluable service to astronomy in another form.

Tycho Brahe, that somewhat ribald, but at the same time so sensitive Danish nobleman who became the foremost astronomer of his time—which did not prevent friends and enemies from continuously making all kinds of low quality jokes about the piece of silver that served as bone in his nose—had clearly realized what was lacking in astronomical observation in his time. So many more or less confused ideas could be presented and so many evidently faulty calculations could be made because there was such a lack of *accurate* observations.

Telescopes did not then exist but Tycho Brahe (who, of course, had no idea that such an instrument was possible at all) had huge quadrants built. They permitted him to measure the position of stars with a higher degree of accuracy than a present day college student could manage even with a good small telescope. A great deal of such accurate data accumulated in Tycho Brahes drawers, waiting for somebody who could make good use of them.

Tycho Brahe finally found a man of the necessary abilities and patience, Johannes Kepler. Years and years Kepler worked, trying to fit Tycho Brahe's observations into a few general equations. Finally he found two of them, those we now know as Kepler's first and second laws.

They read: the planets move around the sun in elliptical orbits, the sun being in one of the two focal points of the ellipse. And: the radius vector – the line between sun and planet—covers equal areas in equal times.

Both these laws (Kepler's third law was not then found) were published in 1609 in a heavy tome entitled: *De Motibus Stellae Martis* ("On the Movements of the Star Mars" . . . Kepler knew, of course, that Mars was a planet; the term *stella* was used loosely), one of the fundamental works of astronomy.

ASTRONOMERS after Kepler, equipped with bigger and always bigger telescopes, succeeded admirably in determining all the astronomical data of the planet. They found that the day on Mars is equal to 24 hours 37 minutes and 22.5 seconds Earth time, that the years are equal to 668 Mars days or 687 Earth days, that its mass is 0.108 that of Earth and its density 0.72 that of Earth. They measured its diameter (4216 miles) and the tilt of its axis (25 degrees). They found that the diameter from pole to pole is 1/200th less than that between two opposite points on the equator. They found that the famous factor g is about 13 feet per second per second (instead of our 32 feet per second per second) they found the velocity of liberation to be 4.97 kilometers per second (instead of our 11.2 kilometers or about 6 miles per second). They found that a thousand ounces would weigh only 370 ounces and that the two moons need 7 hours 39 minutes (Phobos) and 30 hours 18 minutes (Deimos) to circle their planet. This makes Phobos race across the sky like a rocket and Deimos move about as slowly as a hand on a watch.

But all this was not really what the public wanted to know. Mars presented distinct blinding-white polar ice caps that melted away completely in summer and came back in fall to last until next spring. There was certainly

air on Mars, even though thin and there were large darker and lighter patches, suggesting water and land, the ratio between water and land being just about the reverse of their ratio on Earth. In short, there was land and water, sunshine and air . . . what about life?

At first astronomers were reluctant to answer, but then a report came from Milano in Italy that caused more excitement than a declaration of war. The director of the Milan observatory, Giovanni Schiaparelli, informed the world in 1877 that he had observed straight lines on Mars. These straight lines became darker whenever a polar ice cap melted away and faded out as the Martian seasons progressed. Schiaparelli, being Italian, called these lines *canali,* which means in translation "grooves" or "channels," but everywhere in the world people understood *canali* to mean canals. That meant, therefore, that there was not only life on Mars but even intelligent life.

Mars, it was said, was a drying, dying world, therefore the intelligent inhabitants had created an irrigation system for the whole planet. That these lines had to be 30 or more miles wide, did not matter, what we saw were evidently not the canals but the lines of vegetation along those canals. That they were seen double on occasion proved that there were parallel canals for especially wet years.

ENTHUSIASM prevailed everywhere and it is surprising that the number of novels about the Martians did not grow five times as large as it actually did. The public would have been grateful. But even very many serious scientists—at times possibly even a slight majority—were convinced that intelligent beings lived on Mars and thought of ways and means to communicate with them. It is a fact that the first serious space ship designs were made during that period of enthusiasm, by the Russian, Konstantin E. Ziolkovsky and (independently and a few years earlier) by the German, Hermann Ganswindt.

But then the pendulum swung back. The great Swedish scientist Svante Arrhenius termed Mars "a doubtlessly dead world" and while Percival Lowell was doing what he could to uphold the theory of intelligent Martians, other astronomers were much more pessimistic even though only a few of them arrived at Arrhenius' negative conclusion.

Giovanni Schiaparelli himself did not belong to those that defended the Martians at all costs. On May 19th, 1910, he wrote a letter to a friend (the last letter he wrote) in which he confessed that "I did not yet succeed to arrive at a sensible picture of the phenomena on Mars that seem to be more complicated than Signor Arrhenius believes. . . . But I agree with him that the lines on Mars—the word *canali* should better be avoided—might be explained by the action of physical forces alone. I think, however, that certain periodical changes of color are caused by vegetation. . . ."

Sad to say, there is not much that can be added to the words in Schiaparelli's last letter. I do not think that there are any scientists left who still believe in intelligent Martians, unless in *extinct* Martians. And there are only a very few that deny the probability of plant life. Modern instruments that permit measuring the temperature on Mars have shown that summer near the equator is at best like a cool day in early spring on Earth. And the temperatures quoted for the rest of the year are reminiscent of Finland and Siberia in winter.

But that does not exclude the possi-

bility of life of some sort. Neither does the thin air. Occasionally somebody tries to show that there is no oxygen at all in Mars' atmosphere. And usually somebody else claims a year or so later that there *is* oxygen in the air. That the white polar caps consist of real snow and not of carbon dioxide snow (dry ice) is now undisputed. That they are only a few inches thick (or less) is also generally conceded. Water *is* rare on Mars. But life can manage with very little if it has to do so. And that oxygen is rare does not even mean that there is only plant life and that the possible animal life (if it exists) is not mobile.

The fish in our own waters show that an organism can do with much less oxygen than we inhale habitually from our rich atmosphere. There might be an adaptation of life that, per cubic inch of volume and per pound of Martian weight, can do with as little oxygen in air as fish do in water and be just as speedy.

The great philosopher, Immanuel Kant, said several times that every science is really exact only as far as the mathematics it contains will go. If we still had to learn that lesson, we would only have to look at Mars. Most of the things that can be expressed in figures are known. But as soon as it comes to questions where mathematics will not serve so easily, our step begins to falter. And after a thousand hopes and theories and considerations we arrive at the conclusion: "There seems to be vegetation in certain areas."

« ITALY'S ACE IN THE HOLE »

By WESLEY ROLAND

WITH the Nazis daily robbing their "ally," Italy, of almost everything that isn't nailed down, doddering Il Duce has had more and more reason to be glad that his engineers showed a little foresight before he dragged his opera-loving, gesticulating people into war.

These engineers knew that Italy was short on both coal and oil reserves, possessing neither of these natural resources. But they also knew that they had a plentiful supply of power at their disposal, if they'd go to the trouble of tapping it. They had volcanoes.

Tucked away in the hills between Florence and Pisa lie a group of natural steam wells created by underground burpings of this volcanic region. Called the Valleys of Hell, this area in the hills of Tuscany has been converted into a Martian adrenalin gland for Italy's war effort.

It now supplies valuable horsepower to sagging Italian industries manufacturing death dealing devilment for their hated pals, the Nazis.

Over an area of some twenty square miles, the earth has been tapped in 300 places with shafts gouging 1,000 to 1,500 feet into the guts of the soil. Pulsating steam coursing up these shafts drives twelve gigantic turbines and generates over 32,800,000 kilowatt hours of electricity each month—almost as much as Wilson Dam.

Latest information discloses that six additional turbines have been added and are in operation with more in the drawing board stage. But maybe British bombs will have something to say about this.

« ICE TO ORDER »

There's a strange story of science behind ice. Here are some curious facts that will give you a new picture of the amazing story behind a very ordinary, everyday phenomenon; frozen H_2O

OF THE millions of spectators who annually watch their favorite hockey teams battle for victory on hundreds of artificially created rinks throughout the country, at least half of them are mystified by the ice that is used—at least that is what almost any ice hockey promoter will tell you, if you care to ask him. He'll also tell you that most of spectators can sit in a room at 70 degrees fahrenheit while ice at 32 degrees fahrenheit remains hard in the same room. Well, here are a few facts that'll help clear up this "mystery of the hockey rink":

To get an idea of the amount of ice required to make a hockey pond, consider the size of an area one hundred and eighty feet long and eighty feet wide, over fourteen thousand square feet. Put an inch of ice on that, and you've well over a thousand cubic feet of ice, enough to keep you in ice cubes the rest of your life.

But how does it get on the concrete floor in a warmly heated building, like, say, Madison Square Garden? First of all, under the concrete floor, not on top of it, an immense griddle or waffle iron of pipes is laid—almost thirteen miles of them under the two-inch-thick floor. When ice is needed compressors begin to pump freezing brine through this maze of pipes. This cools the concrete surface of the floor and water is sprinkled in thin layers on this cold surface. This cools in layer after layer, freezing into a one inch layer-cake of ice—this makes the best kind of ice for skating.

Early attempts to make artificial ice resulted in so much mush that gave way and ruined many a pair of twenty-dollar hockey skates. But workmen got out their pneumatic hammers, dug up the floor, put in more brine pipes, slapped on a new layer of concrete, and, presto, this time the ice stayed hard.

The griddle of pipes at Madison Square Garden cost in the neighborhood of one hundred thousand dollars, but what's that in an age of science and billions. These pipes do double time duty; they both freeze the water into ice and melt the ice back into water—they are the quick change artists that make it possible for Cab Calloway to "Hideehoe" on one night and for the Black Hawks to play the Rangers the next. When this takes place the griddle courses with warm water instead of frigid brine. The concrete floor becomes warm, the ice mushy. Then plows bite into the ice, break it off in big chunks; sweepers and scrapers follow pushing the ice into neat little piles all over the floor. Then strategically placed manholes are opened and the remaining ice is pushed through these where it subsequently drains off into the city's sewage system. The floor is then squeegeed of excess water with rubber squeegees and the floor is ready for a swing band or a rodeo.

At Madison Square Garden ice can be frozen in three hours, ready for play; and removed in less than a half an hour—just another one of the wonders of science right under our nose.

Scientific

CAHOKIA MOUND, TREMENDOUS AND MYSTERIOUS CLAY STRUCTURE, WAS DUG WITH CLAMSHELLS—A MORE PRODIGIOUS JOB THAN THE GREAT PYRAMID OF GIZEH—

JOE C. SEWELL

WHY DID THE **MOUND BUILDERS** LABOR ? WAS IT TO ERECT A **SIGNAL** FOR A RESCUE-PARTY FROM ANOTHER PLANET.

DOES THAT **RESCUE** EXPLAIN THE VANISHMENT OF AN ENTIRE RACE ? **WHAT STRANGE RELICS** WILL SCIENTISTS FIND WHEN THE MOUNDS ARE FULLY EXCAVATED.

Mysteries

THE LOST RACE OF ILLINOIS

By ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

Here, right in our own country, is a lost civilization, more mysterious than any other whose relics have been left scattered over the earth for excavators to unearth

THE pyramids of Egypt are usually considered to be one of the wonders of the world, and rightly so, but what most people do not know is that there exists in the heart of the United States a group of pyramids rivaling, and in some respects surpassing, those of Egypt.

Located on a flood plain just across the Mississippi River from St. Louis, Mo., is a group of mounds. No doubt many a tourist, whizzing by them on U.S. Highway No. 40 thinks he is passing through a range of rather unusual hills. These piles of earth are so large they do resemble hills but they were not put there by nature. They were constructed by a lost race, the Mound Builders of Illinois. Where this people came from, what happened to them, and why they built mounds, are three mysteries probably forever unsolvable. One fact alone is indisputable. They built mounds. The mounds are there today.

Known as the Cahokia Group, there were, according to one author, at least eighty-five mounds in an area approximately three thousand acres. Many of these however, were small, and since they have been under intensive cultivation for the past hundred years, have been destroyed by the plow. At present only about twenty of the larger mounds are not under cultivation. Many of them are so large that houses have been built on top of them.

Of these, the largest—and incidentally this is probably the largest earthen mound in the Western Hemisphere—is now known as the Cahokia Mound, but was orginally known as the Monk's Mound, taking its name from a group of Trappist monks who made their home on or near this earthen pile about 1810.

This mound is a truncated, rectangular pyramid, the base covering sixteen acres. The base of the Grand Pyramid of Ghizeh, the largest of all the Egyptian pyramids, covers only thirteen acres.

This mound is about 1,000 feet long and 720 feet wide. A football field is 300 feet long and 150 feet wide. The mound, therefore, is as big as *sixteen* football fields laid out side by side.

The Cahokia Mound rises one hundred feet into the air. As a figure, one hundred feet does not sound like much, but when you remember that this is the height of a seven or eight story building, you get a better impression of the size of this structure. It is immense. When you think of covering sixteen football fields with clay, piling that clay as high as an eight story building, you realize that the labor which went into this mound was prodigious. Every pound of this clay, so far as evidence indicates, was dug not with steam shovels but with—clam shells. Flint spades. The pits where it was dug are still visible. It was carried from the pits to the mounds on human backs.

The race that built these mounds—and the Cahokia Mound is only the largest of many—was not afraid of work.

HERODOTUS tells us that the Grand Pyramid of Ghizeh required thirty years to build, with three months' relays of 100,000 men at the task. We have no Herodotus to tell us how long the Cahokia Mound was in the building but certainly thousands of men labored here for many years. Possibly whole tribes, including women and children, worked for generations on these immense earthen hills.

Who built these hills of clay?

Along about here things begin to get creepy. You begin to get the impression that somebody is standing right behind you, but when you turn around, no one is there.

You get the same feeling when you ask who built the mounds. A race capable of such enormous architectural feats should have left its imprint on history. We should have heard of such a people. Geologists who have examined the site say the mounds were built somewhere between 450 and 900 years ago. Historically, that makes them

only yesterday. But—there is no information, no knowledge, of the race that built the mounds. They came from nowhere and they vanished into nowhere. The only evidence we have that they ever existed consists of the mounds they left behind them. The first explorers of this region, finding these artificial hills, questioned the Indians then living here. And the Indians didn't know who built the mounds!

But even more fascinating than the mounds themselves is speculation about why they were built. What kept this race at the hardest kind of labor, year after year piling one basket of clay on top of another, until they had erected mounds that today look like hills? What compelling motive drove them to such stupendous feats?

Defense against enemies is one suggested reason. It is unquestionably true that warriors on top of these mounds would be at a big advantage over an attacking enemy. However, it is also true that a determined enemy, attacking in sufficient numbers to hope to overcome the Mound Builders, would have been very foolish to attempt to fight his way up the sides of these hills. An enemy with any intelligence would merely withdraw out of arrow range and sit down and wait. Hunger and thirst would soon drive the defenders down to him.

Also, if mounds were primarily defensive a lot of work was done for nothing. Within two or three miles is a range of hills, any of which could be better adapted to defense with far less effort than it took to build these artificial piles of dirt. Why work for generations building a hill for defense when you can move a few miles and find such a hill ready made by nature? It doesn't make sense, leading to the conclusion that the builders had some reason other than defense for erecting these mounds.

BUT what reason? Well, superstition might be a good reason. Perhaps the building of mounds was an essential part of the religious beliefs of this vanished people. Superstition in the form of a belief that the body must be preserved if the soul was to survive in the after-life compelled the kings of Egypt to erect pyramids. Perhaps some similar belief prevailed among the Mound Builders, but nothing is definitely known, and while burials are found in the mounds, it is evident that these hills of earth were not constructed primarily as burying grounds.

Then why were they built? There is no answer to that question.

This much is known: somewhere between 450 and 900 years ago there lived on the eastern bank of the Mississippi River across from what is now St. Louis a race of people who built mounds. This much is self-evident. The origin of this people is a mystery. And if no one knows where they came from neither does anyone know what happened to them. The logical reasons for their disappearance—attack by strong enemy tribes, plague—are not impossible or even improbable. These things might have happened. They would serve to explain their disappearance but they do not explain why the mounds were built in the first place.

Supposing, as has often been hinted in science-fiction, earth has been visited in the past by inhabitants of another planet. Suppose the space ship bringing these people from another world was wrecked in landing. Suppose another ship was coming. What would the castaways do under these circumstances?

What do sailors do when they are shipwrecked on a desert island? They tie their shirts to the top limb of the highest tree and prepare a bonfire to light when they sight a passing ship.

Could this have happened here? Could castaways from another planet, seeking to construct a signal that would be visible from the sky, have forced the simple primitive inhabitants of this region to erect a gigantic mound that would stick out like a sore thumb on the flat plains of Illinois? Did a space ship come then, and take the castaways back home? After the gods had gone back to the sky did the Mound Builders, thinking they had received a divine command in this matter, continue building mounds?

THIS explanation is pure fantasy. There is not a shred of evidence to back it up. But—in Illinois on a plain as flat as the top of a table there is a gigantic mound. Surrounding it are smaller mounds. The idea of piling dirt up toward the sky had to come from somewhere. Could it have come from the desperate attempt of a group of castaways from another planet to raise a tower to the sky that a rescue expedition could not fail to see?

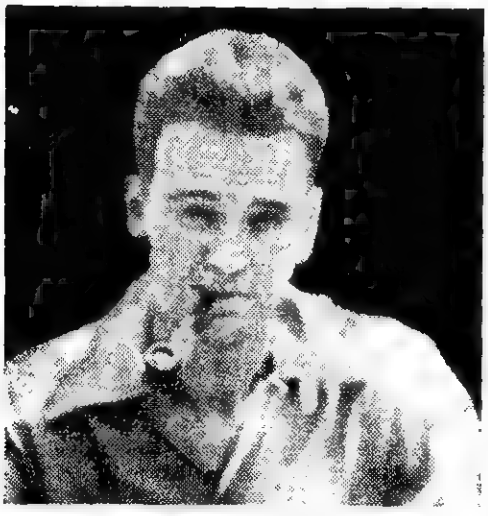
Fantastic as this suggestion is, the true history of the mounds, if it were known, would probably be no less fantastic. There are other artificial hills in this area notably in Ohio, the Cahokia Mound being the largest. They occur elsewhere on the globe. For that matter, what was the Tower of Babel but a gigantic mound? It was built of brick, the pyramids were built of limestone, but the Cahokia Group was built of the material readiest at hand—dirt.

Why should the human race, in places widely separated both in time and space, with little possibility of communication between the peoples involved, have struck on the common idea of lifting towers to the sky? What is it we seek that lies above us?

There is no answer. Something hidden deep in the mind of a man seems to drive him to seek high places. So desperate is the need that he performs prodigious feats of labor, driving himself as no slave was ever driven, trying to build a ladder to the sky.

Out on the flat plains of Illinois a lost race labored mightily building mounds. The race has gone. Perhaps it found what it sought. Perhaps it did not. Today only the mounds remain, an enigma as puzzling as the people who built them.

Meet the Authors



ROBERT W. GLUECKSTEIN

I WAS born, see! Much to the later regret of a lot of people—probably a lot of you readers after you read this and I insist you do!

The fateful date was May 20th, 1917, making me, at this writing, 24 years extant. Everyone thought I was the cutest damn baby with my golden curly locks and beaming smile—I never cried! (An astounding fact noted by the scientists of that day with great awe and trembling.) And was therefore doted and feted by maw, paw, aunts and grandmaw to the point where I became an insufferable stinker—a characteristic which stinks—whoops—sticks to me to the present day. At the age of eighteen years, and some months I'd rather not recall, I awoke with a terrible hangover—(you know how it is when you've smoked too much with the herrings down the block)—my befogged and twisted mentality gave birth to the horrible idea that I should besiege editors with stuff which I would call humorous short articles just to confuse them.

Well, my depravity led me deeper and deeper into the realm of rejection slips and I found myself in dark places and holes in walls writing jokes. A few of them were sold to Colliers and the Saturday Evening Post by several cartoonists whom I plagued with my gags. Seeing these said slugs (the cartoonists) raking in all the dough for the gags aroused the mercenary nature in me. I decided to learn to draw myself and line my own pocket with 100% of the take. So I done it. Since I was my own teacher, and skipped a lot of school, I stunk as a cartoonist for many years (four to be exact) and maybe you still think I can't draw, huh? Well, it's still a free country and you're entitled to your opinions.

Furthermore, the editor asked for this autobiography—so shuddup! Anyhow I am sailing along peaceably making nice dough and so on when I am suddenly doing cartoons for Editor "Rap" for his Amazing Stories and Fantastic Adventures. This leads me to believe I have reached a pinnacle of some sort.

Like all cartoonists I am a character who is trustworthy, loyal, brave, kind and cheerful. I keep myself mentally awake, physically fit and morally straight and outside of that am stubborn, nasty-tempered, irritable, irascible, and really quite a card. In fact I occasionally make an awful ace of myself at parties of which I am the life of which.

I think I oughta insert somewhere along here that I was born, raised, and reside in Milwaukee—a fact which they'd sooner keep on the quiet, so don't mention it to anyone. The town would rather be famous for its beer than for such a distinguished, accomplished, intelligent son—.

Outside of taking a trip to Mars each summer in search of proper ideas for this magazine, I do little else with my time but eat and sleep and make Hildegarde merry. She is my wife so it's all right.

Cartooning, I find, is fun. You're your own boss, yuh sit at home all day cramped comfortably over a hot drawing board and, (for exercise,) go down after the rejection slips which pour in with each mail. Make good resolves to do better next time. Do about 20 to 30 new gag ideas between eating and sleeping; draw up the few acceptances every now and then, cash the checks (you hope), and outside of that there is nothing to it—child's play really.

My only ambitions are to be the greatest cartoonist and humorous writer in the country, to make a comfortably cool million a year, and to keep on loving my wife. Maybe I have another ambition, but these will do for the present I'm sure.

I hope you all simply love me too terribly and write Mr. "Rap" of this magazine and tell him he simply *must* buy more of my stuff.

ROBERT W. GLUECKSTEIN

DISCUSSIONS

AMAZING STORIES will publish in each issue a selection of letters from readers. Everybody is welcome to contribute. Bouquets and brickbats will have an equal chance. Inter-reader correspondence and controversy will be encouraged through this department. Get in with the gang and have your say.

SINCE 1927!

Sirs:

I have been a reader of AMAZING STORIES ever since the first issue was published back in April, 1927, and have enjoyed thoroughly every issue that I have ever bought.

My favorite author who recently appeared in the magazine is Edgar Rice Burroughs and I wish that you could have one of his stories every month. But you are doing swell and here's hoping 1942 will be another banner year.

If you will be so kind as to insert in AMAZING STORIES and the companion magazine *Fantastic Adventures* that I am interested in purchasing books by Edgar Rice Burroughs, I will appreciate it very much. I am trying to complete a collection by this author and I still lack quite a number. Every reader that has some of his books and wishes to sell them, I would like to get in touch with me by card or letter stating the titles, the condition of the book, and the price desired.

CARROLL H. WEYRICH,
2800 Alden Road,
Parkville, Maryland.

We are sure our readers who have books to complete your collection will write to you. Other titles might be secured if you write directly to Mr. Burroughs at his home in Tarzana, California.—Ed.

PELLUCIDAR IMPOSSIBLE

Sirs:

I am not prone to writing to magazine editors, but your latest Edgar Rice Burroughs opus "The Return to Pellucidar" brings up an interesting idea. Sir Isaac Newton proved that there would be no effective pull of gravity inside a hollow planet. For the proof, which states that a man or similar body would float freely in such a hollow space, see pages 656 and 657 of the first American edition of Lancelot Hogben's *Science for the Citizen.*

The proof does not involve Burroughs' central sun, but the presence of such a body would only attract particles toward itself in a manner unaffected by the surrounding earth shell. Therefore, air would be more dense toward the sun and a balloon would "rise" away from the sun or into the earth shell. Any un-anchored body on the inside of the earth shell would fall into the central sun.

Aside from this lack of scientific exactitude, Mr. Burroughs' story is excellent. Your magazine is, in its class, excellent.

JACK SHARP,
1219 N. Tejon,
Colorado Springs, Colorado.

We don't believe Burroughs has made his central sun as large as you presume. Perhaps there is ground for argument here. How about it, readers? And authors Burroughs and Ralph Milne Farley? This is your fight, too!—Ed.

WE ARE HONORED

Sirs:

This is to inform you that your magazines AMAZING STORIES and *Fantastic Adventures,* have been chosen by the SUPPORTERS of SCIENCE FICTION in AMERICA to be two of the magazines on the list of six sf mags which are most popular among the members of our club. We even think of ourselves at times as the Gallup poll of science fiction. So what is true among us is probably true throughout the U. S.

The SSFA is a group of enthusiastic sf fans composed of 74 regular members, 19 off and onners, 33 honorary members in New York City, 4 others in New England, 3 in Milwaukee and 4 others in London, England. A grand total of 127. We send copies to the London branch of magazines they cannot get.

Our aims are to support the sf field, send helpful suggestions to editors willing to accept them, and defend sf as a group even if it doesn't exactly come up to the standards of Darwin's Theory of the Species, as some critics think it should.

We hope you will print this letter so that other readers can get the slant of 74 to 127 people each month. We earnestly hope that you will give it thought. Perhaps the accumulated and condensed opinions of so many people will really benefit you. We do not mean to be egotistic when we say this for on the whole in the past you have only printed letters from individuals and now you have the novel chance (or so we think) of printing the opinions of over 4 score people condensed in one letter.

The SSFA only considers magazines for our

"favorites" list which have individuality, initiative, informality to some extent, and educational value. As well as real enjoyment.

We have not written before because we have been only partly in touch with eastern members and only recently with Londoners which is really an exciting story. Now, though, we are well organized. To sum up this letter here is a condensed opinion of our club regarding your two magazines, AS and FA. One good thing about us, we are easy to please, so your mags have come through with flying colors. One of your strongest points, outside of superb stories, is your back cover on AS. Whatever you do do not stop that. When the city series are over have Paul and anyone else working on that dig up some new ideas. The reason we members want that is that it is very individualistic. 29 members collect the covers of AS and FA. Also if you have not committed yourselves too far into the future with contracts for the back cover of FA, see if you can start a series of covers on it too. Take a hint when I tell you that out of all the members it was the covers, the back especially being unique, which induced 43 members to buy AS for the first time.

Also you may get more new readers if you do for FA as you did for AS.

Here's hoping you get more bouquets than brickbats in the future.

GEORGE V FAIR,
1029 E Gutierrez St.,
Santa Barbara, California

Many thanks for your very interesting letter.—Ed.

LIKES GIANT ISSUES

Sirs:

Keep up the good work on AMAZING STORIES. It would not hurt to have them all giant editions, but I doubt if you could keep up with the expense of selling 240 pages of good reading material and for a quarter, too. The stories, covers, illustrations, articles and the cartoons (they shouldn't be forgotten) were all very good. The January cover was better than the Feb. cover but both were good.

Suicide Ship to Earth, Robot Al-76 Goes Astray, and The Man Who Changed History, rated first, second, and third. Mr. Wisel's Secret was last. Scientific Mysteries, A City on Ganymede, and Scientific Oddities were good articles. The front cover and Fuqua's illustrations were the best pictures. The cartoons are fitting to the magazine and humorous; keep printing them.

Fantastic Adventures would rate first if it weren't for AMAZING STORIES. It's more fantastic than Amazing but still good. It hasn't near as much science.

JORIS F. MARTIN,
2715 W. Yale Ave.,
Denver, Colo.

You will note we have 276 pages including covers this month. How do you like that? We

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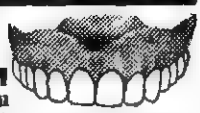

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really have a giant issue this month. Let us know what you think about it. As for Fantastic Adventures, we are pleased to note that you like it. We have made the April issue a giant issue also, with 240 pages. Better get it, on February 20th.—Ed.

FROM MANILA BAY!

Sirs:

Have been reading your stories for quite some time now and finally decided to send you my opinion of your magazine.

Personally I think your stories are exceptional in good reading material and I get a *kick* out of some of the shorts that your writers put out.

My job on this ship is radioman and the only thing I have to do in my spare time is read and its quite a relief when a fellow has a magazine with some *spark* in it to read.

I haven't any general comments or should I say criticisms, but as a whole the stories are of the higher type. I can't say as much as some of your more intellectual readers, but some of the comments don't seem to jibe with my ideas. Well, everyone is entitled to their opinions.

You say some of the young women read your stories and yet I haven't seen very many comments or letters from any of the fairer sex. Maybe they don't like to hit the headlines. As for myself, I like to argue some of the points out, but not too often, or too much. I can't figure some of the women out, but they will after a time voice their opinions. I'm not trying to make any false accusations, but most of the fairer sex usually have plenty to say.

Well until later I think I'll stick by and see what happens. Thanks again for your magazine and you can count on my suport.

R. E. EDLUND, *Radioman,*
USAT Hugh L. Scott,
Ft. Mason, California.

P.S. Pardon my mailing this from Manila, but I guess this is as good a place as any. Will be back in the States soon.

This letter was mailed to us on November 14th, and arrived on January 5th, from Manila. There's quite a gap of time there, and what a gap in history! We hope you are still safe, Mr. Edlund, and that the USAT Hugh L. Scott is just one of the many ships giving the Japs hell right now!—Ed.

ROSES FOR FARLEY

Sirs:

Congratulations on your February issue. Boy, it was great. "The Immortality of Alan Whidden" was the strangest, and the best, time-travel story I ever read. I will defend this against all comers.

Here is my personal rating for this gigantic issue. . . .

1. THE IMMORTALITY OF ALAN WHIDDEN. Delightful!

2. THE RETURN OF MAN. A close second. Really something different.

3. THE MAN WHO CHANGED HISTORY. I like all time stories, and this was good.

4. VOYAGE INTO THE LIGHTNING. Good, well written, but not quite up to the standards of the first three. Maybe it was just a little bit too melodramatic.

5. ROBOT AL 76 GOES ASTRAY. Fine short, but it wouldn't have done for a novelette.

6. KIDNAPED INTO THE FUTURE. Well written, but on the same old theme of "henpecked husband makes good," in a futuristic and science-fiction setting.

7 THE RETURN TO PELLUCIDAR. Maybe it is revolutionary placing the old master this low, but I never cared for Burrough's under-world stories. All his others are tops.

8. THE FIEND OF NEW LONDON. Just didn't appeal to me. It opened too slowly.

9. MR. WISEL'S SECRET. The only reason it ranked this high is because I like a story with this kind of ending.

10. THE COSMIC PUNCH OF LEFTY O'ROURKE. Costello comes through with a great story in Fantastic Adventures this month, but this one was terrible.

11. SUICIDE SHIP TO EARTH. Farnsworth ditto.

All in all, a swell edition, but there are a few things I'd like to say.

Please—I'm on my knees when I ask you, but *please* give us trimmed edges! I hereby organize the SISFPITE, or Society for the Improvement of Science-Fiction Publications by the Introduction of Trimmed Edges. Let's show 'em, gang!

I'm glad I don't see any more Oscar stories. He was awful, and Adam Link was getting pretty stale.

GENE HUNTER,
526 E. Capitol Ave.,
Jefferson City, Mo.

We're afraid you'll have a lot of readers up in arms when you talk against their two favorite characters. But here's an Adam Link for you that ought to make you change your mind!—Ed.

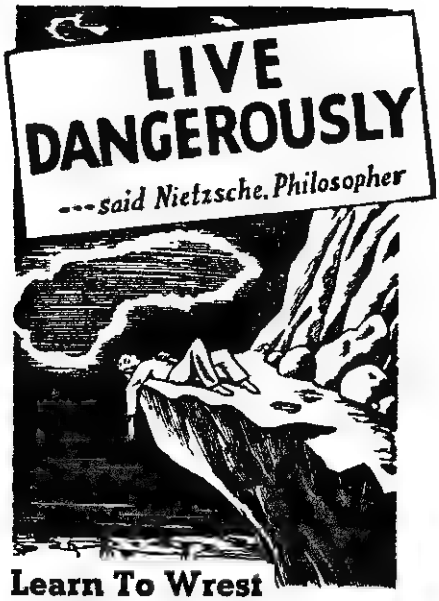
A TRUE STORY?

Sirs:

I have always gotten a big kick out of your exciting magazine, but I have never written to tel you about it although I should have. I work out here in the Power House which can get pretty lonesome, so I sure look forward to the stories in your magazine and would like to hear from others interested in the same

Here is something which another reader might be able to tell me something about It is a really amazing story which has been on my mind for a couple of months but I can't find out any more about it.

This happened to a friend of mine and he swears it is true. He says he was driving along the street in Salt Lake City late at night. Suddenly he saw a young girl standing on a street



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corner trying to hitch a ride. He offered her a ride and she got in the back seat. He took her to the address she gave him and when he got there she had disappeared. He couldn't understand this and went to the door and rang the doorbell. An old lady answered the door. My friend told her what had happened. She said that the girl he had picked up was her daughter and that she had died a year ago. She was killed in an automobile accident exactly at the corner he picked her up.

Now I thought this was just a good yarn, but the next week another fellow told me almost the same story but said that it had happened in Los Angeles. He even gave me the exact street address.

I have asked other people about it but I don't get to speak to many people out here. So I wonder if any of the readers of Discussions have heard this story. If they would tell me what they heard, where it was told and about what year, I should be very much obliged because I would like to trace it down.

EUGENE HANKEY,
c/o Los Angeles Bureau of Power and Light,
Boulder City, Nevada

How about it, readers? If you've heard a version of this same story, why not drop Mr Hankey a line?—Ed.

DISAPPOINTED

Sirs:

I was disappointed in your February issue. Here's how I rate them:

1. The Return To Pellucidar (I am a Burroughs Fan.)
The Immortality Of Alan Whidden.
2. The Return Of Man.
Kidnaped Into The Future.
3. Voyage Into The Lightning.
The Man Who Changed History.
4. The Fiend Of New London.
Suicide Ship To Earth.
Robot Al 76 Goes Astray.
The Cosmic Punch Of Lefty O'Rourke.
Mr. Wisel's Secret.

Your FEATURES are very good, but I miss the Science Quiz. Paul's back cover was also very good but the front cover could be better. Please print more space stories like The Monster Out Of Space by M. Jameson and along with such stories put some *Space Theory* on paper.

PHILIP T. FROGEN,
3421-22 Ave. So.
Minneapolis, Minn.

P.S. I await your next issue with optimism.

We don't get what you mean by putting "space theory" on paper? Do you mean an article on actual methods proposed for the navigation of space, or articles on possible types of ships, or what? Let's hear from you further.—Ed.

TOP STORIES

Sirs:

On a fateful day in August, this year, I walked into my favorite magazine store and picked up

a copy of AMAZING STORIES and have been reading it since then.

Beginning with the September issue I am going to give you what I call the top stories.

September:

1. Enchantress of Lemuria.
2. The Throne of Valhalla.

October:

1. Mystery of the Martian Pendulum. *Tops!!!*
2. The World of Miracles. *Different!*

November:

1. Convoy to Atlantis. *Swell!!*
2. The Stevedore of Jupiter.

December:

Every story was swell except:

1. The Odds On Sargeant Shane.
2. The Planet of Lost Men.

January:

1. The Jan. ish was swell or perhaps it's better to say *SUPER!!*

February:

The Feb. ish was *SUPER*, also. I vote for an enlarged issue every month. How about it??

Oh yes! If you know of any one who is interested in joining a s.f. club let them join ours, *The Science Fiction Club Of New York.*

Presidentially yours,
DAVID GRAB,
75-07 185 Street,
Flushing, N. Y.

We hope everybody in New York joins your club, Mr. Grab. And we are glad you liked our stories. We select them from hundreds of manuscripts, and you can be sure that when we get a good one, it is really the cream of the cream of the crop!—Ed.

LIKE A COMIC BOOK

Sirs:

I have been a constant reader of AMAZING STORIES for over ten years and have seen its size, cover and illustrations go through a series of changes. In recent issues, the December one in particular, the contents also seem to be changing—for the worse, I am sorry to say.

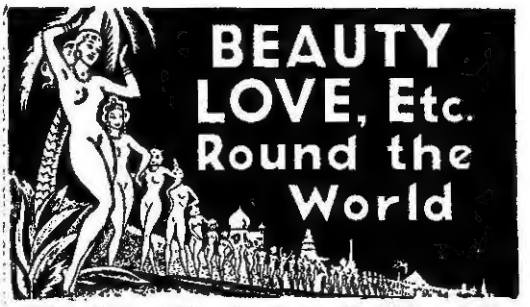
More and more, our 'mag' is getting to look and read like a glorified comic book. The stories are mostly pure adventure with a rocket ship thrown in, and as for the illustrations; they would be more fitted to 'Buck Rogers'.

The editors would do themselves a good turn if they would refer back to the issues of 1929, 1930 and 1931 to find out what good science fiction looks like.

However, I still have hopes, so have no fear of losing this reader, at least for the time being.

A. FRANK RADDEN,
1541 5th Street,
Brooklyn, N. Y.

No editor ever refers back to past issues when he is considering material for future issues. We are sure that if we actually did what you advise, you would be the first to exclaim in disapproval. Our



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memories of the past always outlive the stories themselves. Actually, rereading them you'd find them inferior to today's fiction.—Ed.

A MERE WOMAN

Sirs:

I don't know if a mere woman has a chance in your discussions, but after reading "Mr. Wisel's Secret" in the February issue, I have to demand an explanation. After spending five frantic minutes searching for the rest of the story, I had to come to the conclusion "That's all there is". What's the idea leaving me *and* Mr. Wisel up in the air? I want some more of the story.

MRS. ROBERT CONWELL,
RR9 No. 630
Dayton, Ohio.

Mr. Wisel was a Martian, secretly scouting Earth for some mysterious reason we of Earth cannot know, until it happens. And he has discovered that if he calls himself a Martian, no one will believe him, and he can scout in freedom.—Ed.

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RETURN of
Lancelot
BIGGS
CAUGHT in the gravity of the sun! The space ship and its occupants seemed doomed! Ominous
Major Gilchrist groveled on the floor, terrified by the irresistible gravity. . . . Sparks, normally brave, found his spinal column turning to a slow trickle of ice water. He had seen a ship gripped by Sol, a dark mote struggling against a brazen magnet . . . then a tiny, ochre flame flinting wanly . . .
Shrewd Lancelot Biggs, friend of all the crew, was aboard with his brand new wife. . . . "You must help me, Mr. Biggs! Save me—" Gilchrist wailed.
But could he? Could Lancelot Biggs, with all his knowledge of science, combat a gravitational grip thousands of times greater than Jupiter's?
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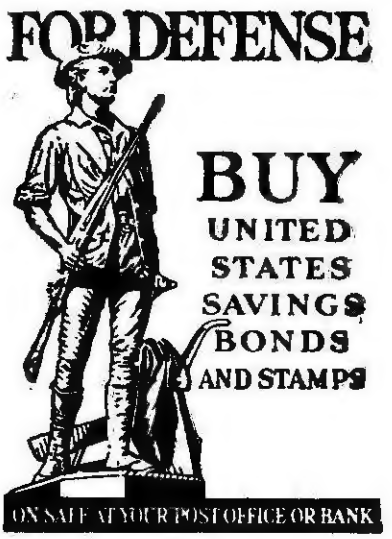
CORRESPONDENCE CORNER

Will S. M. Ritter of New York, who wrote to Mrs. Dolores Lapi, 42-47th Street, Weekhawken, N. J., please send her a postal bearing his return address? She will be happy to answer his letter then . . . To highest bidder! Brand new copy of "Wenbaum Memorial" never opened, autographed by Raymond A. Palmer. Write Thomas Hoguet, 3671 Broadway, New York City . . . N. E. Goring, Fredericksburg,Va., has an Ulca Camera, in good condition that he will sell cheap . . . Charles E. Rigdon 1040½ Leishman Ave., New Kensington, Pa., age 27, 6 ft. 2 in. tall brown hair and eyes, desires to correspond with the male sex between the ages of 21-30—soldiers or sailors and readers of science fiction . . . Betty Mystrom 209 West 21st Street, Cheyene, Wyoming, would like to buy a copy of "The Mysterious Mr. Quinn" by Agatha Christie. She is 19 years old and would also like to correspond with people around her own age or older. Her hobbies are photography, horseback riding and reading . . . Any fan who believes he can write stories or SF articles for a fan magazine get in touch with Tom Ludowitz, 2310 Virginia, Everett, Wash. . . . Ruth Gay Fallis, 22 Howard Parkway, New Rochelle, N. Y., would like to hear from others who enjoy reading SF. She would like to correspond with anyone over 18 . . . Gilbert H. Jacobs, 936 East 15 Street, Brooklyn, N. Y., is desirous of contacting both male and female, age 18, living in the following locations: Alaska, South America, any British Dominion, Crown Colony, et al. His interests lie in the fields of science and other ideas as glass blowing . . . Shelley Frend, 2400 Leslie Street, Detroit, Mich., 20 years of age would like to correspond with girls from 17-22 . . . Richard Geney, 218 Fletcher Hall, Ann Arbor, Michigan is forced to dispose of a large collection of science-fiction and fantasy magazines at very reasonable prices. The collection includes AMAZING as far back as 1926, every issue of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, and many others. All are in good condition . . . Arthur Young, 1710 Montgomery Avenue, New York, N. Y., wants to correspond with young people, 18 and over (anyone under 80) and make personal friends with residents of New York City. He would like to organize a splendid social and cultural movement interested in the future. He is not interested in hearing from persons who are in any way connected with communist, nazi or fascist organizations. He'll answer all letters promptly . . . Hal Velardi, Sub Base Box 19, Coco Solo, Canal Zone, a sailor twenty-two years old, five-feet-seven, likes all sorts of sport, has brown hair and eyes, would like to hear from girls all over the world. Others are welcome to write also . . . S. David, 12 William Street, Maritzburg, Natal, South Africa, has for exchange cigarette, post and other view cards, and curios and novelties. Also genuine lucky charms. Will take in exchange magazines, books on Occultism preferably, and novelties. Please send yours . . . George Foust, 169 Little Albany St., New Brunswick, N. J., 21 years of age, would like female correspondents as pen pals about 18 or 19 years old. He is interested in pals from nearby cities . . . Don Eastman, 236 Lawton Terrace, Council Bluffs, Iowa, would like to trade the book "Tenar of Pellucidar" for "Gods of Mars" or "Back to the Stone Age" or "Pellucidar," all by Burroughs; would also like to buy science fiction books, please send list . . . Charles W. Wolfe, 214 Grand Ave., Las Vegas, New Mexico, would like to hear from anyone who has for sale a copy of Whitman Pub. Co. book No. 4056, "Tarzan and the Tarzan Twins With Jad-Bal-Ja, The Golden Lion," a Big-Big book copyright 1936 . . . S. M. Ritter, 1160 Simpson St., New York City, has 45 sci-fic mags to trade for others. Will also swap Vol. 1, No. 1s and Esquires for histories, biographies, etc.



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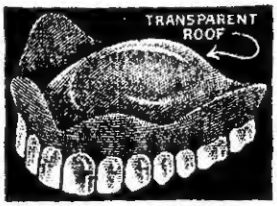

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